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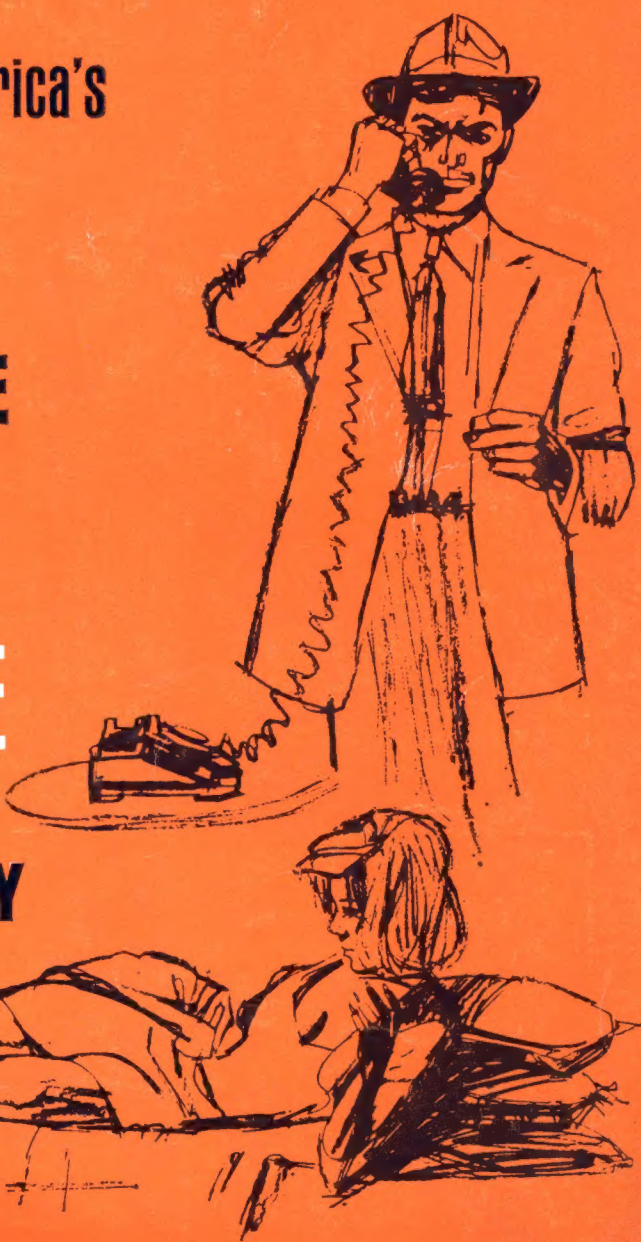

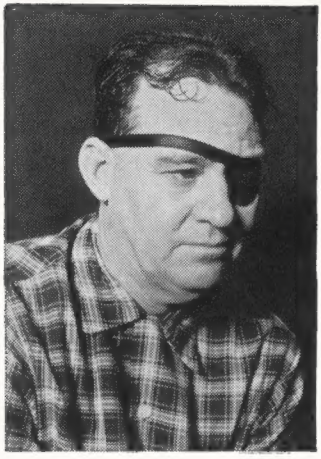

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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JUNE, 1966 Vol. 19, No. 1

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

THE BIG FRAME

by BRETT HALLIDAY

One man murdered . . . another slated for death. Somewhere out in that night of terror Mike Shayne must break the sinister murder ring which held a big city in its clutches . . .

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Complete

THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

THE BIG FRAME

A killer without a soul . . . a girl without a chance . . . Somewhere out in that danger-packed night Mike Shayne must crack the grim riddle which had sent one man to his grave—and could well send another to the gallows.

by BRETT HALLIDAY

THE BUILDING was long and low and set in a field just off the main highway some two hundred fifty miles north of Miami and ten miles beyond the small town of River Bluff. The property of McNamara Brothers, long distance truckers, the building was a storage warehouse and transfer point for loads coming up from Miami and going on north and west. This night it was silent and deserted.

About forty miles south, on the main highway from Miami, a bright red convertible stopped for gas. The convertible top was up; the figure inside was indistinct in the night. The person did not get out, or speak, but paid the attendant through the window and drove on north.

Forty-five minutes later the red convertible stopped at a drive-in roadside diner on the outskirts of River Bluff. The occupant again did not get out, but ate two hamburgers in the darkness of the car. The light was better here than at the gas station, and the waitress saw the driver better—a man, dark-haired and with a mustache, and wearing dark glasses even at night.

Fifteen minutes after leaving the

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diner, the red convertible stopped in a clump of trees three hundred feet from the transfer warehouse of McNamara Brothers. The driver got out, walked stealthily across the fields to the warehouse, and went inside, carrying a bulky canvas bag.

The red convertible was seen parked in the trees by three passing motorists and a truck driver from River Bluff.

Approximately ten minutes behind the red convertible, at the same gas station forty miles south of the transfer warehouse, a small black sedan pulled in for gas. A woman got out of the sedan and talked to the attendant.

The same car, the black sedan, also stopped at the drive-in diner, but the woman did not eat. Again she got out and talked to the waitresses. The woman ran back to her car and drove north.

At the transfer warehouse the single night watchman saw a man leave the warehouse. The watchman challenged the man, and was struck a severe blow on the head and rendered unconscious. In the warehouse office, later, the recovered watchman found the safe open. Later it was discovered that $75,000 in cash was missing. The watchman called the sheriff's office.

The next morning, a Sunday, the body of a man was discovered in the clump of bushes where the red convertible had parked. He was a tall man, fair-haired and clean-shaven. He had been shot twice in the back.

The sheriff talked for fifteen minutes with Fred McNamara, the owner of McNamara Brothers, who resided in River Bluff. The sheriff, whose name was Matt Dade, learned that the dead man was Joseph Pinker, the general manager of the trucking firm.

The rest of that Sunday was spent by the police of the county learning all the facts that have been stated above. A teletype was sent to Miami Beach.

Peter Painter, Chief of Detectives for Miami Beach, went to a good but not grandiose house in a better section of Miami Beach. There he questioned a woman who showed him her small black sedan. The garage of the house was a two-car garage, the other space being, at this time, empty.

At eight o'clock that Monday morning the red convertible drove up to the house. A tall man, dark-haired and with a mustache and dark glasses, got out and entered the house. He was promptly arrested.

His name was George Gatling. He was charged with robbery and murder. The woman, his wife, began to cry.

II

MIKE SHAYNE was awakened by the insistent ringing of the tele-

phone on the table beside his bed. The big raw-boned redhead groaned. He had been out all night with an old friend, and the brandy had been excellent. His head was not. He held his breath waiting for the telephone to stop ringing. The telephone did not stop.

Shayne opened his eyes and was blasted in the eyeballs by the bright morning sun through the windows. He had forgotten to draw his shades. He wished whoever was calling had forgotten his phone number.

He reached for the phone and a cigarette at the same time. He lighted the cigarette.

"Shayne," he barked into the receiver.

The voice at the other end laughed. It was the voice of Shayne's best friend, Tim Rourke.

"You must have had a bad night," Rourke said.

"A good night," Shayne said grimly. "Too good."

"Sorry, but I've got a problem for you."

"Can it wait?"

"Maybe you'd like to hear what the problem is."

Shayne sighed and drew deeply on his cigarette. He sat up and swung his legs off the bed. He ran his big hand through his unruly shock of red hair.

"Okay, Tim. Shoot."

"Well," the lean reporter said from the far end of the line, "I was

down at police headquarters over on the Beach this morning when I saw them bring in a guy I know. Name of George Gatling, a shrewd lawyer I've tangled with before. I said hello, but at first he didn't seem to see me. Then he started shouting.

"He yelled all over Painter's station house—'Get Shayne!' You can imagine how that pleased Painter. 'Get Shayne,' he yelled. 'It's a frame, a frame! Get Mike Shayne!' So here I am getting Mike Shayne."

"Gatling, eh? I've heard of him. What's the charge?"

"Murder One and burglary. Seems there was a trucking company transfer warehouse robbed of seventy-five thousand dollars hard cash last Saturday night up near River Bluff about two-hundred and fifty miles from here. The general manager of the trucking company was killed. Gatling did legal work for the company; he knew all about the layout up at River Bluff, including that there would be sev-

enty-five thousand dollars in cold cash in the safe this weekend."

"How bad is it for him?"

"Painter is grinning from ear to ear," Rourke said.

"How come Painter is handling it?" Shayne said. "Sounds like it's a River Bluff matter."

"It is, only they asked for help. Gatling lives on the Beach. Painter's going to hold him a while until he finds the money and gets all the proof. You know Painter. He wants to deliver Gatling all wrapped up in gift wrapping."

Shayne smoked thoughtfully in the sunny room. Of what he remembered about George Gatling, the lawyer was no better than he had to be. On the other hand, if it were a frame, he deserved help. Besides, the lawyer could probably pay very well, which would be nice.

"All right, Tim, I'll go see him. What's your impression?"

There was a pause at the other end of the line. At last Rourke spoke slowly.

"I don't like him, Mike, but this time I think he may be telling the truth. He sounded real scared and really helpless. Gatling's capable of murder, Mike, but I think he's smart enough to do it better than this. They picked him up the moment he got home. From what I hear, he left a trail even the hick sheriff couldn't miss."

"Okay, Tim. I'll have a talk with him and see you later," Shayne said.

"Good. I smell a story, so keep me filled in, right?"

"If I take the case, Tim," Shayne said.

After he hung up, the redhead sat thoughtfully for a moment. He tugged slowly on his left earlobe. Then he picked up the telephone again and called his office. Lucy Hamilton sounded bright and perky. Shayne winced inwardly.

"Speak softly, Angel," he said to his pert secretary.

"That will teach you not to be greedy just because you have a friend," Lucy said primly. "I gather you don't plan to work at all today, Michael?"

"That was my plan, but Tim just changed it," Shayne said, and briefly explained the situation to his pretty secretary. "See what we have in the files on George Gatling, and check with Will Gentry. Okay? Not the whole story, just the once over lightly. I'm going to shower and shave."

"I'll get right back to you, Michael," the voice of the brown-eyed girl said.

Shayne winced again. He could picture Lucy's alert and shining face. He hung up and went to shower. He stayed a long time under the hot water, steaming the thick muscles in his neck and shoulders. Then, gritting his teeth, he turned on the cold. He let out a howl that could have been heard on the dark side of the moon, grinned, and came awake.

By the time he had dressed, the telephone rang. Lucy Hamilton was crisp and to the point.

"George Gatling, age forty-two, former athlete in college. Married, no children. Wife's name is Verna, age twenty-nine. They have been married eight years. She has money, quite a lot of it. She got it from her late mother. Her father is still alive, also rich, a big-time stockbroker. His office is in New York, but he lives here most all the time."

"Gatling is a good lawyer, from his record, but just a little shady. Will Gentry says they have a file on him, three or four close-to-the-line deals. He defended Tony Perdido three times and got him off—murder each time. Gentry says Tony was certainly guilty on one of the charges. His connection to the McNamara outfit? He is general counsel for the company, and a board member."

"Whoa, Angel," Shayne said, sipping on a glass of orange juice. "Who else is on the board?"

"Fred McNamara, president and chairman of the Board; Clem Algood, the president of River Bluff National Bank; two outsiders who live in New York; and the late General Manager, Joseph Pinker. McNamara and Algood live in River Bluff; Pinker did live here in Miami the same as Gatling."

"Where's the other McNamara?"

"Dead. Angus McNamara the older brother died last year."

"Anything else, Angel?"

"Well, Gentry says Gatling has a reputation as a gambler and ladies' man," Lucy said, her voice registering disapproval. "His wife started divorce action once, and Gatling has been named at least twice in other actions by irate husbands. Once a husband took a shot at him."

"A nice man," Shayne said.

"Are you going to help him, Michael?"

"He might be innocent this time, Angel," Shayne said simply.

There was a pause. Then, "Of course, Michael. You have to help him."

"All right, Angel. Now I want you to check on where I can find everyone you mentioned. Gatling says he was framed. The question is, by who?"

"I'll do it at once, Michael."

Shayne finished his orange juice after he hung up. Then he had a half a pound of bacon, toast, and coffee from his special dripolator. After that he lighted a cigarette and felt better. He began to think.

He had a murder and a robbery. If it were a frame, as Gatling claimed, then anyone who knew about the $75,000 in the company safe, and anyone with a personal grudge against Gatling could be involved. The two crimes could be connected, or they could be separate. They were probably con-

nected, but he would keep in mind the possibility that they might not be.

He left his apartment in the apartment-hotel and went down to the garage by the back stairs. He drove slowly, still going over the possibilities, and crossed the Causeway in the bright Florida sun into Miami Beach. He decided that he would talk to Gatling first, see Painter later.

That way he would get Gatling's story cold, without knowing more than Gatling did. After that he would see Painter, and maybe talk to Gatling again when he knew what Painter had. By hearing Gatling's story first, he could pinpoint the omissions better later.

It was almost noon by the time he parked his car in front of Miami Beach police headquarters.

III

GEORGE GATLING faced Mike Shayne nervously across the barrier in the visiting room. Shayne studied the lawyer. Gatling was tall and good-looking, well preserved for his forty-odd years. The lawyer wore a dark mustache, had dark hair, and normally had a ruddy skin. Now he was pale.

"It's a frame, Shayne, pure and simple," Gatling said.

Shayne considered that the man was properly nervous for an innocent party facing a good frame-up. A guilty man would bluster more, rave, be outraged. An innocent man was usually too stunned and scared to bluster.

"Okay," Shayne said. "Tell me what you know."

Gatling looked grim. "In a nutshell, Shayne, it goes like this: Last Sunday morning, or late Saturday night, a man was seen in the River Bluff transfer warehouse. He belted the watchman and got away. His description fits me pretty closely, although the watchman admits he didn't get a good look."

"How did they pick you up so fast?" Shayne asked bluntly, "If the ident wasn't positive?"

"I'll get to that," Gatling said, the lawyer being plainly a man with an orderly mind, even under the present pressure. "Anyway, when the watchman woke up he checked the safe. It was open and cleaned out of a special seventy-five thousand dollars that was there. It had been torched open, clumsily, and the cops know I know something about burning a box. I got some of Tony Perdido's box men off once."

"That's helpful," Shayne said drily.

Gatling swore. "I told you it was a good frame, very good. Wait until you hear the rest. The watchman called old Sheriff Dade. The sheriff is good for beating up transients, but not for much else. They didn't find a clue until morning. Then a kid out with an air-rifle spotted a body in a clump of

trees about three hundred feet from the warehouse.

"The sheriff got in touch with Fred McNamara, and the body turned out to be Joe Pinker. No one's figured out yet what Joe was doing there. Anyway, he was dead, murdered. The police theory seems to be that Joe caught me with the swag and I shot him. Felony murder! You know what that means."

Gatling stood and began to walk. There was a hiss from the guard. Gatling looked scared and sat down again. Shayne saw the lawyer's throat twitching. Gatling licked his lips as if they were so dry they would never be wet again.

"How did they pick you up?" Shayne said.

Gatling shrugged. "Easy. It seems I left a trail even old Dade could find. First, Shayne, let's get the worst part over."

The lawyer looked Shayne in the eye. "Only six men knew there would be seventy-five thousand dollars in that safe: McNamara, Algood, the two New York board members, Pinker, and me. Pinker's dead, the two New York boys have airtight alibis, McNamara and Algood have alibis, too, and they can prove they didn't need money. I did. I'm in hock to Ray Incavo for twenty-five thousand dollars."

"You told no one?"

"No one. Maybe the others did, but the cops figure it adds up to me cold and simple," Gatling said.

"What about the trail you left?"

Gatling nodded. "After they found the body and McNamara told them who it was, even Dade had to get to work. I suppose they put out an APB on anyone who had seen anything at that clump of trees. They came up with a local truck driver who'd seen a red convertible parked right there at the time of the robbery."

Gatling laughed, a bitter, nervous laugh. "That was all they needed. They had the watchman's description of me, and McNamara knows I drive a red convertible! It took them about two hours to find a gas station man and a waitress at a drive-in diner who had seen the red convertible, and *me* in it, on its way out to River Bluff at just the right time. They were waiting at my house when I got home this morning."

There was a silence in the visitors room. The uniformed guard was bored to the point of yawning. The room was stifling and airless. Shayne pulled hard on his ear.

"So far it looks bad enough," the detective said, "but they have to have more than that."

"They do, you can bet on it, only they haven't told me what yet," Gatling said. "The way it looks from here they've probably got the money and the murder gun —both in my convertible, if you want my guess."

Shayne watched the tall lawyer, who seemed to have shrunk. Gatling was still rigid, tense. Shayne

could guess why. He had not yet asked the big question. Now it was time. A frame-up needed two parts: the positive part, and the negative part.

Shayne sighed as he asked the big question. "They would have called you at home. I gather you weren't home? You have no alibi?"

"I wasn't home. I've got an alibi but it won't stick."

"Where were you?"

Gatling laughed, but his pale face was sweating. He hesitated a second, and then shrugged.

"Okay. This is the big rap, I've got to tell you." The lawyer looked straight at Shayne. "I was two hundred miles away. You've checked on me; you know I'm no saint. I drove up north, not a hell of a long way from River Bluff, to see a dame. I was there all weekend. Her name is Doris Field. The town is Sentry."

Shayne narrowed his grey eyes. "You drove? Then—"

Gatling shook his head. "No, Shayne, *not in my own car!* You know about me. My wife has the loot, she almost divorced me once before. So—"

The man stopped. Shayne watched him. Shayne was beginning to feel a cold sensation at the back of his neck. Either Gatling was guilty as sin and trying to con him, or the lawyer was in a very good frame. Almost as if Gatling had set himself up.

"I've been seeing Doris for over six months. I've been very careful. Last Saturday morning I was supposed to be on a weekend fishing trip—just me, on a charter boat. I paid the captain to lie for me if my wife asked, but I didn't pay him enough to lie to the cops. He told them I wasn't there."

"How did they learn about the charter boat?"

Gatling nodded. "My wife told them. She blurted it out when they arrested me. That phony story really cooked me. Now they won't believe the truth. My dear wife really hung me."

"Are you suggesting she told the story about the boat to frame you?"

"Who knows? Maybe she was just trying to help. All I know is whoever it is has to know all about my weekend trips to see Doris. They couldn't have planned the frame without that."

"Where was your car?"

"Parked down by the bay, near the charter boat dock. It was sort of out of sight. Supposedly it was there all weekend. You see, I always used a different car to go see Doris. I was being careful. My car might have been recognized around where Doris lived, and, anyway, if I put four hundred miles on the speedometer my wife might have noticed. I was real cagy.

"I had it planned. I left my car where it would be if I had gone fishing. I rented another car. I

made sure no one saw me near Doris. I covered my tracks fine. Only when I drove home this morning in the convertible it had five hundred extra miles on it when it was supposed to have been parked all weekend!"

"No one saw you all weekend?"

"No."

"How did you rent the car?"

"By telephone, and hid my face when I picked it up. Gave a phony name."

"Someone had to see you. Think!"

"No one," Gatling said. "Except Doris, of course. We spent the whole weekend holed up at her place. Only you know just how far her testimony is going to go, Shayne. Ten witnesses to say they saw me at or near River Bluff, including the watchman, and one who says I was fifty miles away all weekend in a different car. And that one on my side is my girl friend, a woman who admits to shacking up with a married man! Even I couldn't get to a jury with Doris!"

"But she will swear you were with her?"

"Of course, damn it, but what good is that? You know they'll say she's lying to help me," Gatling said.

Shayne nodded. "But at least it makes a doubt. It depends what the police actually have to back up the circumstantial stuff you've told me."

"What more do they need? The watchman is pretty sure it was me. My car was seen by three witnesses less than three hundred feet from the warehouse, exactly where the body was found. My car, and myself, were seen by a gas station man and a waitress—the waitress only a few miles from the scene. And those two were positive, they picked out my picture!

"On top of that, I was one of the few who knew the money was there. I needed money, and my only alibi is Doris! What more do they need? Shayne, you've got to bust the frame! It's the only way."

Shayne considered. Gatling was in a mess, no doubt of that, unless he were really guilty. The girl, Doris, would be useless—he wouldn't believe her himself. It was a good frame, for a fact. But no frame was made that couldn't be broken. If Gatling was telling the

truth, then someone had arranged for his car and himself to be seen, and that someone would leave a trail.

"Who would frame you?" Shayne said bluntly.

Gatling laughed bitterly. "Who wouldn't? A lawyer makes a lot of enemies. I could give you a list that would reach from here to Jacksonville. Only it has to be someone who knew all about me and Doris, about my trips and the way I faked the fishing trip."

"That narrows it down?"

"I think so. I've only been doing it six months, and I've been damned careful. On top of that, it has to be someone who knew about the seventy-five thousand dollars. That rules out my wife and her father."

"It leaves only McNamara, Algood, the two in New York, and Pinker, but he wouldn't kill himself," Shayne said.

"And Tony Perdido," Gatling said. "Me, I've got my eye on Tony. He has his own ways of learning anything."

"All right, but that's still not many. You're sure that's it?"

"It's all I know about," Gatling said.

"What motive would they have to frame you?"

Gatling shrugged. "The money, maybe. I figure I'm just the fall guy, a made-to-order patsy once they found out about my little trips every weekend. My wife and her damned father probably have the best motive, only they didn't know about the money."

"What about Perdido?"

"I know a lot about Tony, who knows when he might figure he doesn't need me."

"You're a big help," Shayne said.

"If I knew more I wouldn't need you, Shayne," Gatling said.

"Maybe it's not as bad as you think," Shayne said.

"How much worse could it be?"

"That depends on what Painter has," Shayne said.

Gatling just stared up at him as he stood and signaled to the guard. When he left, Gatling was walking slowly back to his cell like a man already condemned. It looked bad, Mike Shayne admitted to himself, the question was: how bad? What else did Painter and Sheriff Dade have?

IV

PETER PAINTER laughed. "What else? How about the gun, fired and his prints on it."

"That's pretty good," Shayne said.

Peter Painter smirked. The cocky little chief of Miami Beach detectives lounged back in his chair behind the desk. Painter did not like Shayne, and the dapper little clothes-horse was enjoying every moment. Painter's pencil mustache actually twitched with pleas-

ure as he told Shayne how bad it was for Gatling.

"How about some of the loot? Say, about two thousand dollars in identifiable bills?"

"You've got that?"

"In his car. The money had slipped down beside the seat. A couple of small parts from an acetylene torch outfit, too! In the car. A cool five hundred miles on the car that was supposed to be parked. Three witnesses place the car at the scene."

"You found the gun in the car?"

Painter laughed. "No, Shayne, we found the gun at the scene, but it was his gun, his prints. He admits he carried it in the glove compartment. Claims he left it in the car when he took that convenient trip to see his sweetie."

"You've checked the girl?"

"Dade did. She only lives about fifty miles from River Bluff. She says he was with her, but no one else saw him or her. Come on, Shayne—who'll believe her?"

Shayne sat facing the small chief of detectives. Painter was too pleased with his case to be ready for much analysis that might open up questions. Still, there were questions. It was too good, too obvious. If the gun had been in the car that would have made him sure it was a bad frame, but the gun hadn't been there, which made it a good frame.

"Let's see what you have," Shayne said. "You've got a man, a clever man, who plans a robbery complete with alibi and then lets himself be seen all over, drives a red car, kills a man, and is so stupid he leaves evidence all over his car. His alibi is so phony it cracks on the first question, so he comes up with a second alibi so bad it only makes him look guiltier! Come on, Painter. You've got a frame-up."

"I've got a killer!" Painter snapped. The dapper chief of detectives leaned forward. "I've got witnesses, the weapon, part of the loot, and part of the tools. I've got time, place, opportunity, and motive! He needed cash bad."

"Can the watchman make a positive identification?"

"Well, no," Painter said. "But the gas station guy and the waitress can. And don't forget—Gatling says he wasn't in his car at all, but witnesses say he was and right near the scene."

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. "How can they be so sure? It was dark; they must get fifty cars an hour."

Painter's laugh was long and loud. Shayne knew that Painter had something else.

"Sure, only they had a special reason to remember. You see, Shayne, what Gatling doesn't know is that he was followed that night!" And Painter choked so hard on his laughter that he could not go on for a moment.

"Followed?"

Painter choked and gasped. "Yes, followed! A party in a black sedan came after him; looking for him. She showed his picture to them, and they told her he had just driven through ahead of them! So when Dade went around looking, they really had a reason to remember."

"She?" Shayne snapped.

"Right, she! Gatling's ever loving wife!" Painter chortled.

"And she told you this?"

"No. We found out about the second car and braced her with it. She denied it, but the witnesses identified her, too. Her car had the mileage on it, and her maid admits she didn't get home until early Sunday morning."

"What's her story?"

"She trailed him—anyone can figure why—and lost him in River Bluff. Then she came home. But that nails him good!"

Shayne tugged slowly on his earlobe. "Yes, it nails him to the wall."

"Face it, Shayne, Gatling tried a robbery for the money he needed. Pinker spotted him, so he killed Pinker."

"Maybe. But why doesn't he have a better alibi?"

"He never thought he'd need it. He was just too careless. If we hadn't spotted the car, his alibi would stand up."

"Yes," Shayne said. "He was very careless, wasn't he?"

"It happens, Shayne. If they didn't get careless, we'd never catch them," Painter said.

"No," Shayne agreed. "I'm counting on that."

He left Painter trying to puzzle that remark out. Shayne knew as well as Painter himself that the dapper little man, for all his bantam-rooster bad temper and arrogance, was a good cop. He was pretty sure that Painter, too, was worried about the excessive carelessness of Gatling. But that would not stop Painter pinning the crime on the lawyer if there was no one else.

It was up to Shayne to find someone else. Gatling's wife looked like a good place to start.

The Gatling home was not far from Miami Beach police headquarters. Shayne reached the house and parked across the street in the sun. He lighted a cigarette and considered what he would ask. It looked like the first question was just how much did Mrs. Gatling know about her husband's little affair?

A small, fine-boned girl answered the door. From her clothes, Shayne guessed that this was the maid. He asked for Mrs. Gatling. He was ushered into a large, but neither over-large nor gaudy, living room. The furnishings showed considerable taste, more than he would have expected from George Gatling.

The reason was not long in coming. Good taste walked into the

room with a slender, willowy woman wearing black and silver lounging pajamas. She had dark hair, almost black, worn long and curled in a single upturn at the end that rested on her thin, elegant shoulders.

"Mr. Shayne? I'm Verna Gatling," the lithe woman said in a low, pleasant voice. "Won't you sit down?"

Shayne sat down. He smiled but his grey eyes were watching Verna Gatling. The woman did not seem particularly disturbed by the plight of her husband. And it was her quickness in telling the yarn about the fishing boat that had gotten Gatling in jail in a hurry—a yarn it appeared now she knew even then was a lie! Why had she been so quick to nail her husband?

"I gather you're helping my husband?" Verna Gatling said.

"How do you gather that?"

She smiled. "I know about you, Mr. Shayne. And I know George. He claims he is being framed, and he would send for only the best to protect his skin. You're the best. I've always wanted to meet you."

"Now you have," Shayne said drily.

"Yes, now I have," Verna Gatling said. She smiled, crossed her fine legs. "And I like what I see. I like it very much."

"I'm not so sure I like what I see," Shayne said bluntly.

The woman neither flinched nor stopped smiling. She smoothed her slacks over her hips and waited for Shayne to go on. Shayne had a certain feeling that Verna Gatling was a dangerous woman.

"How come you followed him that night? And why did you tell that boat story so fast when you knew it was a lie after you followed him?"

"That's two questions. Which one do you want answered first?"

"Take your pick," Shayne said drily.

"Actually, it doesn't matter. They are really both the same question," Verna said smoothly. "I followed George because I had an idea he was on another of his little frolics. I told about the fishing boat because I really thought it might hold up, and if it didn't I was sure he had been with a woman and that that would be his alibi. You see, I didn't know what they wanted him for then."

"You knew about Doris?"

"Is that her name this time? No, I didn't know about Doris, but I knew about Sally and Jean and Annie and a few more. You know I filed for divorce once? Of course you do. Well, I thought I had him this time."

"You do," Shayne said bluntly.

"Not this way," Verna said simply.

"All right. But if you didn't know about Doris, how come you followed him?"

"Pure accident, Mr. Shayne," Verna said. She smiled. "May I

call you Mike? I dislike formality, and I want to get to know you better."

"Accident?" Shayne said, ignoring the purr of her low voice. He could find this female interesting, and that was not ethical. At the moment he decided he would be ethical.

"Yes, Mike, accident." She laughed. "Poor George doesn't even know yet. He'll have a fit when he finds out. You see, we'd been having our usual troubles—fights and all that—and when he went off on Saturday to fish as usual, I got to feeling sentimental. He was fishing too much, you understand?"

"You really bought the fishing yarn?" Shayne said with a considerable skepticism in his voice.

"Yes, I did. Oh, I knew about his flings, but I also knew how much he really liked fishing, and how he had always liked to fish to relax. Anyway, I suddenly became sentimental. I began to think that part of our trouble was being apart too much. So I called the boat that evening. I was going to ask him to come home early."

She laughed. "Well, I got the boat on ship-to-shore, and the captain said he was aboard all right but couldn't come to the phone. That was all right; it had happened before, and he had always called me back within a half an hour or so. I know now that he had it arranged so the captain would call him wherever he was, and then he would call me."

Verna Gatling lit a cigarette, blew smoke. "Only this time I heard something very odd. I heard what sounded like automobile motors. They were supposed to be far out at sea after sailfish or marlin. But I knew I heard traffic in the distance! The boat was close to shore somewhere. That got me furious: I figured he was coming back early and not telling me. So I went down to the dock in my own car."

She looked into the distance as if seeing something far off. What she was seeing she did not like.

"The captain will back up that story?" Shayne said bluntly.

"Of course," Verna Gatling said coolly.

"All right. What happened when you got to the dock."

"The boat wasn't there. I know now that he never was on the boat. I don't even know where it was. But his car was there, and just as I arrived I saw it drive off."

"You saw his car drive off? The red convertible?"

"I did," she said, and suddenly her face was twisted with a surge of hate. "I saw him drive off and I followed. He got ahead of me, but he was heading toward River Bluff. That was logical; he goes there to do his work for McNamara quite often. It was a logical location for one of his damned doxies! I stopped and checked all along the

route. He was just ahead of me. I made sure of that by showing people his picture. I trailed him to just outside River Bluff, and then I lost him."

Verna blew a hard stream of smoke. "It never occurred to me to go to the warehouse or the office. That was about the last place I thought he would be. I was so sure he was with a woman. I cruised around, in a fury, but I couldn't find the car or him. So at last I drove back here. I waited all day Sunday. Monday morning the police arrived, and then he walked in. He was still driving the convertible, all innocent! Damn him!"

The woman stared again at something in the distance of her angry mind.

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. The story was pretty solid—and without proof. The call to the captain could be checked, but could have been faked. The drive up to River Bluff was public record, but its reason could not be proven. And Gatling had come home in the red car.

"You said you saw the car. Did you see him?"

"Him? You mean George? Well, yes and no. I mean, I saw a man driving, and it looked like George, but I never got close enough to speak to him. Those people I talked to identified his picture. What more do you need?"

"I'm not sure," Shayne said slowly. "But you admit it could have been someone else in that car? Someone disguised to at least resemble your husband?"

Verna stared at Shayne for a long moment. The lithe woman seemed to be thinking. Then she began to nod.

"I never thought of that. You're right, though. I never got a close look. But what about the people who identified the picture?"

Shayne shrugged. "You showed them a picture of a man who you said was driving a red convertible. A red convertible had just gone through, and the driver resembled Gatling. That would be all they needed. Later, when the cops came, they would see a picture just like the one you showed them!"

"And would identify it absolutely because of my picture! Of course, that could be the case!"

Shayne watched the woman, who seemed surprised by this sudden thought. Maybe she was, and maybe she wasn't.

"You're sure you didn't think of that before this? I mean, maybe you planned it that way so they would identify him."

"Me? You think I framed him? Why? Tell me why?"

"You wanted a divorce; he wouldn't give you one. A man in jail for a felony can be divorced. At least he's out of the way."

Verna Gatling stared at Shayne. She opened her mouth and closed it. She stared more. Then she finally spoke.

"All right, Mike—how did I do it? I didn't know about his little trips. I certainly didn't know about the seventy-five thousand dollars. I couldn't have driven both cars!"

Shayne nodded slowly, rubbed his gaunt chin. He watched the slender woman.

"Maybe you're right. If I could answer those questions, I'd have it all solved. When I do answer them, I'll really have it solved."

"If you answer them—which you won't because I'm telling the truth," Verna Gatling snapped. And then she smiled again. "I don't mind. You have to work for George. I've got nothing to hide. George is guilty, and you know it. When you're sure, you can come back and we'll—talk."

"I'll be back, all right," Shayne said.

He left the woman still smiling at him. Outside in the sun he walked to his car and got in to think. The big point in her favor was the money—even Gatling admitted she couldn't have known about it. Then, maybe he had two crimes, the robbery and the murder. Maybe they weren't connected.

He swore softly.

That was a crazy idea. No, it looked like Verna Gatling was innocent. Only someone had been in Gatling's car, unless Gatling was

guilty. He would not be surprised at that.

But he owed Gatling some more work. The next step was to call Lucy Hamilton and collect some addresses. There were a few people in Miami to see before he went to River Bluff.

V

THE FATHER of Verna Gatling, a Mr. Rogers Sinclair, lived in a plush penthouse atop one of the more lavish new apartment houses in Miami. Sinclair was a tall, well-built man no more than fifty-five, dark-haired and looking younger than his years. When Shayne explained his mission, Sinclair did not embrace him with open arms.

"Anyone who wants to help George Gatling out of even a parking ticket is not welcome here," Sinclair said.

"You don't like your son-in-law, I gather?" Shayne said with a broad grin.

"You gather correctly," Sinclair snapped.

"Exactly why?"

Sinclair paced the sunny floor of his penthouse. Outside the afternoon sun was low in the blue sky to the west. The penthouse had a view all around. Away from the sun Shayne saw the blue of the bay and the distant sea beyond Miami Beach.

"Have you met my son-in-law, Mr. Shayne?"

"I have, yes."

"Then don't ask stupid questions! Would you want George Gatling for a son-in-law? Never mind—no sane man would. He's a liar, a cheat, perhaps even a criminal. Now it looks like he's a murderer. I'm damned if I can say I'm either surprised or in the least bit sorry."

"You come pretty close to hating him."

"More than close, Mr. Shayne. I'm glad my daughter may be free of him at last."

"Glad enough to have helped it along?" Shayne asked bluntly.

"Helped? Ah, I see. Gatling claims that he has been framed?"

"Framed is the word," Shayne said drily.

Sinclair stopped his pacing long enough to light a long, thin cigar. The smoke, the aroma, told Shayne that the cigar was a very good cigar. Sinclair did not offer him one. The big redhead sighed. The day had been long, and the night before had been far too short. He wondred how good Sinclair's brandy would be.

Sinclair finished the ritual of lighting his cigar, puffed speculatively for a moment, and resumed his pacing. The tall older man looked at the expensive carpet on his floor.

"Let me put it this way, Mr. Shayne. If Gatling has been framed, I would be proud to have had a hand in it. However, I don't

think he has been, and I did not arrange anything."

"All right," Shayne said. "But maybe you can help me. Did you know about his latest girl friend?"

Sinclair laughed. "Who is the latest? I was under the impression that he never stopped having girl friends on an assembly line basis."

"That doesn't answer my question, does it?" Shayne said.

The tall stockbroker neither smiled nor frowned. Shayne decided that Sinclair was a hard man, perhaps even dangerous.

"It's the answer you'll get," Sinclair snapped.

"You didn't know Doris? That Gatling went to see her just about every weekend?"

"It was my impression that he went fishing."

"You believed that?"

"Of course not. But Verna seemed to, and much as I hate that man, I love my daughter. There was no point adding to her problems by revealing my own suspicions."

"What about the money?"

"The money?"

"The seventy-five thousand dollars in McNamara Brothers safe."

"You mean the money Gatling stole? How the devil would I know about that? I'm damn well not in the habit of consulting with my son-in-law about his shady business activities."

"You know nothing about it?"

"Nothing at all."

"But you did know something about Doris Field?"

"No, not beyond the conviction that there was always some Doris Field or the like in Gatling's clutches," Sinclair said.

Shayne watched and listened. He had learned something about the tall stockbroker by now, and he was convinced that, in some way Sinclair was lying at this point. He was sure that Sinclair had known something about Doris Field. The question was: how much, and who had told him?

"You think I'm lying, don't you?" Sinclair said, the shrewd eyes of the stockbroker watching Shayne.

"Yes," Shayne said.

"Then I can't help you any further, can I?" Sinclair said.

"I suppose not." Shayne stood up to leave.

Sinclair watched the redhead, the cigar clamped firmly in his mouth. Sinclair clasped his well-manicured hands behind his back and watched Shayne stand up, turn to go. The stockbroker father of Verna Gatling took the cigar from his mouth, coughed.

"I'll tell you what I'll do for you, Shayne," Sinclair said, "I'll give you a lead, for what it's worth. I've heard—never mind how—that there have been some peculiar things going on at McNamara. Not that I think it has any bearing on my son-in-law's chicanery. As a matter of fact, if what I've heard

is true, Gatling was probably involved in it up to his dirty neck."

"What kind of peculiar things?" Shayne asked.

"Rumors of lost contracts, pirated contracts. McNamara was supposed to be in a white heat about it," Sinclair said.

"Why would he be so angry?"

Sinclair puffed on his cigar, looked at the glowing tip. Then looked at Shayne.

"I think because he suspected a leak of information from his board of directors," Sinclair said.

"And you think Gatling?"

"It's the kind of dirty dealing my son-in-law would enjoy."

Shayne nodded. "All right. I'll look into it. But I may want to talk to you again."

"If I have time, Mr. Shayne," Sinclair snapped.

Shayne grinned a wolfish grin. "You'll have time."

He left the tall stockbroker turning black with anger, and strode from the elegant penthouse to the elevator. As he rode down to the street, Mike Shayne looked at his watch. It was late afternoon by now, and the drive was a long one to River Bluff.

In his car he turned north and drove out of the city on the highway. The setting sun hung in the sky to his left, slowly going down as he drove on north and slightly west away from the sea. It was dark by the time he stopped at the gas station.

The attendant was firm in his identification of the driver of the red convertible. But he finally admitted that he had been heavily impressed by the mustache and dark glasses; the driver of the red car had not left the car.

The attendant said, "He never did get out. But I'm sure he was the guy. The picture that dame showed me was exactly like the one the cops showed me."

"I bet it was," Shayne said drily. "Tell me, did you see the car come back late last night?"

"No, not that I remember."

Shayne had not expected to find the return trail of the red car. If it were a frame, the framer would have been careful not to retrace his steps exactly. And if Gatling were guilty, he would have driven over to Doris Field in Sentry to help his alibi.

Shayne continued on his way and did not stop again until the outskirts of River Bluff. There he talked to the waitress who had identified Gatling. Her story was the same—she was sure, but the driver had not left the red car. She, too, was sure that the pictures were the same, and that they were both of the driver of the red car.

Shayne continued on into River Bluff. As he had expected, the first passer-by he asked for directions to the house of Fred McNamara had no trouble giving them to him. In a town the size of River Bluff, the president of McNamara Brothers

would be well known, probably a local power.

The house turned out to be a large frame mansion of the type built originally around the turn of the century. It was set back from a side street in the center of a fine smooth lawn decorated with iron deer and other Victorian relics.

The downstairs rooms of the big house were lighted and Shayne got out of his car and started up to the door. A porch ran around the entire circumference of the house. The verandah was open but roofed, and its entire length was in almost complete shadow.

Out of the corner of his eyes Shayne saw the movement.

Something had moved on the porch.

To his left, near the corner of the verandah before it turned to run along the left side of the house. Shayne drew his automatic and moved swiftly across the lawn into the bushes near the verandah. The night was moonlit, and the shadows of iron deer and round silver balls lay across the blue-white lawn in the night.

Shayne reached the bushes and moved closer to the porch. A dark shadow moved, some three feet above him. He skirted the shadowy porch toward the left corner, where he had seen the movement. He raised his head carefully and peered over the edge of the porch.

A man stood there. A man with a rifle in his hands who was staring toward the steps up to the porch as if waiting for Shayne to appear. Even as Shayne watched the man seemed to become aware that something was wrong. He began to creep stealthily toward the steps up from the walk.

Shayne followed silently close to the porch below. A natural tunnel-like area was formed between the porch and the line of thick bushes that bordered it, and Shayne could move silent and unseen just below where the man with the rifle crept warily toward the steps.

At the steps the man stared off into the night. Apparently puzzled, the man came to the edge of the porch and leaned over to look out across the lawn. With a quick motion, Shayne grabbed the rifle barrel and pulled.

The man tumbled over the railing of the porch and sprawled in the bushes. But he had not released his hold on the rifle. Shayne realized that this man was trained, and was not going to give up his rifle easily. Struggling, the two men crashed through the bushes and out onto the lawn.

With more space to maneuver, Shayne suddenly jerked the gun toward him, released his hold, and dropped the startled and off-balance adversary with a single punch to the chin. Breathing heavily, he bent to examine his opponent.

The noise came from directly behind him this time.

Shayne whirled. But he did not make it.

He had a full view of a big, heavy-set man with blue beard shadow on his jaw and a hard face beneath a wide-brimmed grey Stetson hat. Then a gun butt hit his skull and he crumpled on the grass.

MIKE SHAYNE came awake looking up into the hard face of the big man. A cigar butt stuck out of the big man's mouth underneath the Stetson. The eyes of the big hulk were a watery blue, small and pig-like.

"Okay, buddy boy. Who are you?"

Shayne did not have to see the badge pinned to the shirt of the big man to realize what had happened. He had really known the moment he had seen the Stetson. This, he was pretty sure, was Sheriff Dade.

"Shayne," he mumbled, his mouth fuzzy and the back of his head pulsing like a drumbeat. "Mike Shayne."

"You want to tell me what you was doing around this heah house? We don't like strangers much up this way," Sheriff Dade said.

Before Mike Shayne could answer, the man he had knocked out suddenly appeared in front of him.

A deputy of course. It was clear now that Dade was having the McNamara house guarded. The deputy looked at Shayne with respect, despite a nasty bruise on his jaw.

"He's a private cop, Sheriff," the deputy said. "I heard a lot about him."

"Okay, Al. Just hold on a spell," Dade said, and looked down at Shayne. "Is Al telling it right, Shayne? You a private peeper?"

Shayne nodded. "That's right."

"We like private peepers even worse than strangers, you heah? What you working on?"

"The Gatling case."

"George Gatling?"

Shayne nodded.

Another voice spoke eagerly. "Ask him if he knows where the damned money is."

Dade did not turn toward the unseen voice. He spoke without taking his cold blue pig eyes from Shayne's face.

"Just hold it down, Clem. I'm handling this."

Shayne tried to get up to see the source of the unseen voice. Dade gently, but very firmly, pushed him back down.

"How come you didn't come to me? Don't they teach you nothin'

down the big city, buddy boy? You know you supposed to check in with me afore you ask any questions in my county? Now you checked with me, maybe called out here first, you save yourself a bump on the head and maybe charges of attacking an officer on duty."

"My mistake," Shayne said.

"You so right, buddy boy. Now I think maybe—"

Shayne broke in. "I think maybe you can get McNamara to tell me about the contracts he's been losing, and maybe where he was last Saturday night."

Dade turned beet red. The hulking sheriff clenched his meaty fists and stepped closer to Shayne. The redhead studied Dade. The sheriff was big and hard, but there was flab over his stomach, and his watery blue eyes showed a lot of alcohol under his belt.

Shayne thought he could handle the big sheriff, but this was no time. You don't fight a sheriff in his own county if you ever want to come back.

He was about to calm the big man when the voice of another man he could not see spoke again. A sharp, commanding voice. "That's enough, Matt!"

Dade tried to control his anger. The big sheriff actually shook with the effort of holding himself back.

"I said enough, Matt!" the voice snapped again.

The man who appeared beside Dade was old, at least sixty-five, grey-haired, small and peppery. There was an air of power about him, and his hard blue eyes had no trace of weakness. Shayne did not have to be told that this was Fred McNamara.

"Shayne made a mistake, and he's got a headache to prove it. I know how well you protect me. Now maybe we had all better have a little drink and talk. We don't need Al around."

Dade seemed to give a single violent convulsion as his judgment got the better of his anger. Shayne knew now where the power really lay in this county. Dade was McNamara's man.

"Keep watch outside, Al," Dade said at last.

McNamara turned to Shayne. "Bourbon?"

"Cognac if you have it," Shayne said.

McNamara smiled. "I have everything, Mr. Shayne. Would Remy Martin do?"

"Just fine," Shayne said amiably.

McNamara led the way into a fine old living room where he waved them all to seats, and two houseboys hurried in with the drinks. Everyone but Shayne was a bourbon and water drinker—the sheriff drinking his like a pig at a trough. The fourth member of the group was Clem Algood, president of the River Bluff bank and board member of McNamara Brothers.

Shayne, his cognac in his big hand, drank and eyed them all.

Sheriff Dade had subsided into a brooding silence. It was clear that action, not thinking, was Dade's forte.

Algood was a tall, skinny man of at least seventy. He had a bobbing Adam's apple and a great deal of nervousness. Shayne guessed that Algood may have been president of the bank, but McNamara probably owned it one way or the other.

Fred McNamara was a small, peppery man who was obviously accustomed to having his way and having the best.

Now McNamara was watching Shayne shrewdly.

"You said something about losing contracts?" MacNamara said.

Shayne nodded. "Sources tell me you've suspected that someone on your board has been pirating customers to other companies."

"What sources?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Listen, buddy boy—" Dade began.

"Shut up, Matt," McNamara said. And to Mike Shayne, "All right, Mr. Shayne. I'll not ask you. As a matter of fact, it's not really a secret. But let's pass it for now, and get to what else brought you up here. When you say you're on the Gatling case, do you mean for or against George?"

"Gatling hired me to clear him," Shayne said.

Sheriff Dade snorted. McNamara glared at the big sheriff. Clem Algood leaned forward.

"How can you clear him, Shayne? He—" Algood began.

"Clem, you shut up too and let me talk to Shayne," McNamara said. "How can you clear him, Shayne? From what I hear they found the gun, some money. He was seen all over."

Shayne tugged on his left earlobe. The back of his head was still sore. Obviously Sheriff Dade kept McNamara well informed.

"He says he was framed," Shayne said.

"He has no alibi?"

"Not a good enough one. What about you two?" Shayne said bluntly.

McNamara smiled. "Why us, Shayne?"

"Simple knowledge. It had to be someone who knew you would have seventy-five thousand dollars in that safe. Gatling says that means only himself, you, McNamara, Algood there, and Pinker. Gatling says he's innocent; Pinker is dead."

Dade roared. "Why, you—"

McNamara waved a peremptory hand. "He's right, Matt. If Gatling is innocent, that leaves me and Clem as the only one's who knew about the money. And we have alibis, but maybe not good enough for a frame-up. I mean, we could have hired someone, couldn't we?"

Shayne nodded. "You could. Tell me, why was the money in the safe?"

McNamara laughed. "I was wondering when you'd get around

to that. It was there as a special fund to buy new equipment. The board only voted it two days before. I had it ready for a cash payment today."

"Did you know about Gatling's girl friend Doris Field?"

"No, at least not by name. I knew he had girls. We all did."

"How about his fishing trips?"

"We knew he went fishing a lot," McNamara said.

"Not for fish," Algood said.

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. He could ask about their alibis, but he did not think that would be much help. Sheriff Dade was not about to help him break any alibis of McNamara and Algood. If they were involved, he would have to prove it first, before breaking alibis.

He decided on another tack.

"What was Pinker doing at the warehouse?"

McNamara shrugged. "Who knows? Joe sometimes worked late, and we'd been having that trouble about losing contracts. He was probably just working."

"On Saturday night?"

"Why not? Joe was a hard working man," Algood said.

Shayne nodded. "All right, now what about those contracts? The one's you were losing?"

McNamara tasted his bourbon. "We couldn't prove it, Shayne, but we were pretty sure it was Gatling. I think George knew we knew."

Shayne was silent. They were all looking closely at him. Algood nervously, Dade angrily, and McNamara with a smile. Algood wished he had never shown up, Dade wanted to get his hands on him, and McNamara was waiting. Shayne obliged McNamara.

"Implying that George decided to hit once hard, take the seventy-five thousand dollars and blow before you could prove anything on him."

"It sounds logical," McNamara said.

"So does this," Shayne said. "You knew Gatling was robbing you blind by stealing customers, probably for a kickback, only you couldn't prove it. So you decided to frame a robbery. That way you got him."

Algood protested. "Why would we kill Joe just to get George Gatling?"

It was a good question. Shayne considered it from all angles.

"Maybe Pinker was in on it with Gatling, and you got them both," Shayne said.

McNamara roared with laughter. "You've got a fast mind, Shayne. Yeah, that would fit sure enough. Only Joe was as loyal as they come. Besides, how could we have rigged it all? We didn't know enough about Gatling's personal life for that."

"Maybe you found out," Shayne said.

"You'll have to prove that," McNamara said.

"Maybe I will," Shayne said.

McNamara stared hard at Shayne. "You try, and while you're at it, try to find our money. It's funny it hasn't shown up at all."

"Not if the guy who framed Gatling is sitting on it," Shayne said. "One of you two wouldn't have needed a little money, would you? I imagine it was insured."

Sheriff Dade could stand it no longer. The big man was on his feet, fists clenched, roaring at McNamara and Shayne and everyone within a mile.

"How long you gonna take this

heah? You gonna let this buddy boy sit heah and tell us you's maybe a killer! I say I run him in, disturbin' the peace! When I get finished he ain't gonna have so many smart damn ideahs!"

Shayne tensed, watched the big sheriff. Algood seemed scared witless. McNamara just sat for a long minute. The peppery president seemed to be considering the sheriff's idea. Then McNamara shrugged.

"He's got nothing much, Matt," McNamara said slowly. "What I want is my money, and maybe Joe's killer. If it's Gatling, that's just fine. That way we get rid of him. If it was maybe a frame, Shayne might be able to find our money while he's at it. He got nothing on us, so we can't lose."

"There you are—all's well," Shayne said drily.

McNamara leaned forward, suddenly showing the steel beneath his calm exterior.

"You look, Shayne. Only you be mighty careful, you hear? A lot of things can happen to a man up here. We got nothing to hide, only don't step on our toes. Right?"

"I'll be real careful," Shayne said. "And you don't mind if I look around the warehouse or the murder scene?"

"You go right ahead. Just remember what I said."

Once outside, Mike Shayne lighted a cigarette and thought about McNamara and Algood. They could be telling it straight, or they could be lying. If they were doing anything, it was McNamara. Algood just took orders. McNamara was tough enough to frame a man he couldn't get any other way.

In his car he drove out toward the warehouse. If Gatling had been stealing customers away, and McNamara knew it but could not prove it, then McNamara was tough enough to frame Gatling just to get him. Including a murder to frame him. Only that did not seem likely—the robbery would have been enough.

Shayne smoked and drove in the night. One thing McNamara had said kept going through Shayne's mind, because it was a thought he had had himself. There were two parts to this frame: the $75,000 and the certain knowledge of Gatling's weekends with Doris Field. And so far no one in the case looked like he could have had knowledge of both!

What he needed was a connection between the money and the personal life of Gatling. Maybe Doris Field would supply that.

VII

THE WAREHOUSE turned out to be on the road toward Sentry and Doris Field. Shayne coasted to a stop at the dark clump of trees where the body had been found. He got out.

With his flashlight it was not

hard to find the marks of the tires of the red convertible. A further search of the site turned up nothing until he reached a spot in the bushes not far from where the body had been. There he found broken twigs and other evidence of someone having been in hiding.

Shayne stared at this for a long minute. He tugged on his earlobe. The theory was that Joe Pinker, working at the warehouse, had spotted the thief, trailed him to this spot, and been shot. But who had waited in the bushes?

Pinker? Then how had he gotten to the spot? Or the killer? Yes, that could fit. The killer ran from the warehouse, realized he was being followed, and hid until Pinker arrived and then shot him. That would fit the bullets in the back.

Satisfied, Shayne continued his search of the ground. He found nothing else until he branched out and moved back down the road toward River Bluff. About fifty yards along the road, on the opposite side where there was another clump of trees, he found tire tracks of a second car.

Shayne considered the new tracks. They were pointed in the other direction, toward River Bluff. They could mean something, or nothing. Cars probably parked along here all the time. This particular clump was quite hidden from the road, probably a favorite spot for young lovers.

He found the third set of tire tracks in the soft earth a good two hundred yards closer to River Bluff. These were well hidden off the road. Again, they probably meant nothing, but Shayne decided to keep all the tracks in mind.

One thing certain—the witnesses who had seen the red convertible, parked so plainly in sight, had not mentioned seeing any other cars that night near the spot.

On his way back to his car this all made Mike Shayne think. It had already occurred to him that the red convertible had been parked very carelessly, and that a red car was an odd choice for a man who intended to rob a place where he was well known!

He was still thinking about this as he drove on toward Sentry and Doris Field. It was beginning to look more and more like a frame-up, but it was one thing to believe and another thing to prove it.

Sentry was a grimy little town in the pine barrens of the north center of the state. At this late hour the town was dark, the single main street deserted like a dim alley lined with feeble lights. Nothing seemed to move. The only signs of life were through the neon windows of two taverns.

Shayne drove slowly down the empty main street looking for Doris Field's house. He found it at the end of the street near the railroad tracks. It was a small bungalow hidden away behind tall trees, its rear totally hidden from all sides

by thick bushes. Shayne could see that if someone never left the house, no one would know he was there.

Shayne parked two or three houses up the street toward a tavern that had red and blue neon signs in its windows. He walked back and approached Doris Field's house. There was no light in the front. But the kitchen window at the rear showed light. He knocked on the front door.

There was a silence in the house; then, slowly, footsteps came toward the front door. A light went on in the room at the front. The door opened and Shayne saw a dazzlingly beautiful brunette standing framed in the light. Her face was young and lovely, and she looked at him.

Shayne knew her history at the first look. Young, but not as young as on first sight. More than beautiful, her dark hair like thick silk framing an almost perfect face. Full, moist lips, a fine nose, skin that would feel like velvet. Not tall, but like a perfectly molded doll, high but full breasts and dressed with a simple taste that showed her off but did not shout.

More than beautiful—intelligent, her deep green eyes calm and bright. And born in Sentry, a hundred miles from nowhere. The town beauty, with no town to be beautiful in. No advantages, but shining in high school, and when high school was over there was nowhere to go. No advantages, no special talents, a nice quiet girl despite her beauty.

The world was full of beautiful girls, and it is not easy to get out of Sentry, all the Sentrys. So she grew up, and high school ended, and she went to work for some small company in the office, and one day a lawyer from Miami appeared. He was handsome, experienced, with money, and he paid attention to her.

By then she was tired of the local bucks who had become used to her. What did it matter that the Miami lawyer was a married man? Miami was far away, and she was so beautiful. Beauty has to be appreciated. Beauty has to know it is wanted, taken. So—George Gatling and his smooth words.

"Yes?" Doris Field said.

Shayne blinked out of his reverie. The girl stood without moving, as if she had almost expected some strange man to knock on her door tonight. She probably had. Gatling would have talked to her from Miami. But there were no tears in her eyes.

"Miss Field? I'm Mike Shayne. I'm working for George Gatling."

The girl nodded. "Come in, Mr. Shayne."

She led him through the living room, turning out the light as she went, and into the kitchen. The kitchen table showed that she had had her supper alone in the kitchen. The dishes were still unwashed.

A bottle of good Scotch, half full, sat on the table.

"I tried drinking. I'm not good at it," Doris Field said.

"It takes practice," Shayne said.

"Yes," she said. "I'm in the kitchen because some of them have heard already, the people in town."

"That's probably wise. They don't usually understand."

"And you do?"

She sat down at the table and vaguely waved Shayne to a seat. She stared at him. In the light she was, if anything, even more beautiful. There were dark circles under her green eyes, but she had not been crying.

"I think I do," Shayne said. "Gatling can be very nice."

"Yes, George is very nice," the girl said. "I knew he was married, of course. It didn't matter. Now he's in trouble. They won't believe me. The bad girl, the cheap tramp, but it wasn't like that. I knew he was married all along. I love him. We never planned to marry. He promised me nothing at all except to come here and love me. Why is that cheap? We were honest."

Shayne had no answer for that. He looked at the Scotch bottle. The day was getting longer and longer. Doris noticed his look and nodded wearily. He poured himself a generous drink.

The girl was seeing something through the dark window. "They call me a tramp and George a dirty, evil man, but what have we done? Just fell in love, honestly, openly, with no promises or demands on either side. Now they'll hang him—not for murder, but because he loved me!"

"I doubt it," Shayne said. "Gatling's loved a lot of girls."

She looked at Shayne. "Do you expect that to mean anything to me? What do I care if he had other girls. He is a man."

"You'll stand by him, no matter what?"

"There is nothing to stand by him about."

"He was there all weekend?"

"Yes," Doris said.

"You're absolutely sure?"

"Of course. We never left the house. Why should we? We had all we needed right here. Besides, I was sick Saturday night."

Looking at the beautiful girl, and the small but cosy house, Shayne could believe it. But if they had been so hidden, so careful, how had anyone found out enough to frame Gatling? Shayne drank his Scotch and leaned toward the girl in the quiet kitchen.

"Doris, I want you to think carefully. Did you and Gatling always hole up here? I mean, how did anyone learn that he came here every weekend?"

"I don't know," the girl said.

"Doris, if he was framed, then someone had to know every detail of his weekends with you," Shayne said.

"Impossible."

"Think!" Shayne pressed.

"I can't think! How can I think with George down there in a cell?" The girl began to cry. Shayne watched her. She had not been crying before he arrived, but now she was crying. Was it that, alone, she had managed to maintain some grip on herself, afraid to let go,

hanging on? Or was she a very good actress?

"Listen—" Shayne began.

The girl looked up suddenly. "Wait! There was—" and she stopped, seemed to be fighting to recall. "There was—someone. A month ago, yes. I remember now, George was restless that weekend. He wouldn't tell me why, but he kept looking out the window. Then, yes, he went out to make a telephone call. I remember I asked him why he didn't use my telephone, and he said it was a long distance call and he didn't want a record."

"Who did he call?"

"He didn't say," Doris said. "I didn't ask. But when he came back I'm sure I saw someone watching from the street."

"You didn't see who?"

"No."

"A woman?"

"No, a man. Tall, I think. I didn't get a good look. I can't even be sure he was watching this house. But now that I think, I have the feeling that he was."

"And you don't know who Gatling called?"

"No, but I think it was his wife. She had called the boat a few times. The captain had called George, and he had called back. This time I think he was worried and just called to show interest in her," Doris said.

She looked Shayne straight in the eye. "His wife has the money, you know. George has to have money."

But Shayne was thinking. A man, not a woman. Which meant that any of the men in the case could have known about Doris Field after all. Once they knew about the girl, it would be easy to backtrack and learn about the boat and the practice of hiring a different car to make his trips to Sentry.

"You're absolutely sure no one was around here last Saturday? And neither you nor Gatling ever went out?"

"I'm sure, Mr. Shayne," the girl said, her green eyes dry now and unflinching as she looked straight at him. "I felt a little sick, Saturday night. We went to bed early and slept all night."

Shayne left the girl seated at the

kitchen table, a weary glass of good Scotch in her hand. She did not drink; she simply sat and held the glass as if she hoped that the mere contact would make her feel better.

Outside, Shayne stopped for a moment to look at the house, the street and the town. The street lights were feeble. The house was almost hidden from the street, the rear was totally hidden. To the left the main street ended very soon and there were few houses to the left.

Shayne lighted a cigarette and started toward his car. He was considering what to do next. It was very late, and there was little he could do now in Sentry, or in River Bluff. He wanted to talk to Gatling again, and he wanted to talk to the people in River Bluff. It had occurred to him that Sheriff Dade might know more than he had mentioned.

The detective was just about convinced that it was indeed a frame-up. Everything pointed to it: the carelessness of the driver of the red convertible—Gatling even had the sense to use a different car to call on a girl friend—the lack of actual full view of the driver that night; Doris Field's insistence that Gatling had been with her; the complete stupidity of leaving the gun at the scene, and of having money in the red car.

The question was: who and why? The money seemed hardly enough as a reason to risk involvement in murder as well as robbery in case it went wrong and—

He became aware of people on the dark main street. He was about halfway to his car. The tavern between him and his car was still open. A man had come weaving out of the tavern, swayed and held onto the wall with one hand. A drunk. Yet Shayne sensed, somehow, that the man was not drunk at all.

Behind him he heard footsteps. He looked casually around, continuing to walk toward his car but slowing down. Two men were strolling up the dim main street behind him. They were both short and thin, and they wore topcoats despite the warmth of the northern Florida night.

The man who had come from the tavern still leaned against the wall. Beyond him, near Shayne's car, another man in a topcoat was casually lighting a cigarette. On the other side of the main street beyond his car he saw two more men in topcoats standing under a lamp-post.

The men behind him moved steadily closer. They walked calmly, without haste, their hands in their coat pockets. In the night there was no sound. Except for the men in the topcoats the street of Sentry was deserted.

No cars moved on the dim main street. The only cars were Shayne's car, and two long, black sedans parked at the curb two hundred

feet on either side of Shayne's car. The motors were running in both black sedans.

Shayne continued his slow progress, his grey eyes looking around carefully. They had all escapes blocked except one. He had no illusions as to what they were after. There was only one uncovered avenue—across the street away from his car where a dark dirt alley between two darkened bungalows beckoned to him.

He did not hesitate. He started one more casual step toward the supposed drunk, then dashed at right angles across the street to the narrow dirt alley. He was almost across the street before his stalkers could move.

Then they swung into very fast action.

They converged on him, ran silent and deadly, their hands now holding ugly-looking pistols. Shayne dashed into the alley. There was a low fence at the far end and dark open fields beyond. He did not think they would shoot, whoever they were. Once he reached the open fields beyond the fence there were trees and they would not catch him.

He was twenty feet from the fence when the two men stepped out into his path. They neither smiled nor spoke. They just stood there, hands in the pockets of their topcoats. Shayne knew then that they had him neatly trapped. The men all along the main street had been intended only to force him into the alley.

Behind him the other men moved closer. The two in front stepped up. Shayne stopped and slowly raised his hands. They moved in. Hands took hold of him. Briskly, efficiently, his hands were tied, a gag thrust into his mouth, a blindfold tied over his eyes. Hands hustled him forward.

He stumbled over broken ground. Then he heard the car motor. A door opened and he was pushed inside. The car door closed. He felt men seated all around him. Then the car roared away, its powerful motor purring as it drove very fast along a smooth highway.

VIII

MIKE SHAYNE estimated that the car had driven for over half an hour before he felt it turn from the smooth main highway into a dirt side road. He did not know which direction they had driven, but in the distance he could hear the sound of surf. The car seemed to lurch in soft sand.

After another ten minutes, the car stopped; the motor was cut off. There was a silence. Then doors opened and hands thrust Shayne out. His feet sank into sand. Pushed, he lurched forward. The sound of the surf was close by.

He felt wooden steps beneath his feet and stumbled across a wooden porch of some kind. A door opened

and he was pushed through. Through the blindfold he saw light. Hands shoved him roughly into a chair. The gag was removed and the blindfold.

"Hello, Shayne."

The man seated at a bare table in front of Shayne was a slender but powerfully built man of about thirty-five. He had curly black hair, a handsome dark face, and wore a tweed sportjacket that must have cost $300. His manicured hands rested on the table—soft hands that had never done a day's work. The only discordant note was a faint budge beneath his arm, where he carried the tool of his trade.

"Hello, Tony," Shayne said. "I guess you wanted to talk to me."

Tony Perdido grinned with some of the finest white teeth outside the movies. Shayne could remember when Anthony Perdido was a scrawny slum child with rotting teeth. The shiny caps had cost Tony a few ill-gotten thousands of dollars. Tony had come a long way since then.

"A little talk, okay?" Perdido said.

"All you had to do was ask," Shayne said.

"I like to arrange my own meetings," Perdido said. "You ask, maybe a smart guy like Mike Shayne don't come alone, huh?"

"Okay, Tony, I'm here. What do you have on your mind?"

"Right out, yeah? Just like that. Okay, Shayne," Perdido said. And

the gangster turned to his men. "Out, all of you. Go on—get outside and stay close."

The small army of Perdido's men filed out of what Shayne could see now was a beach shack. A single room with nothing in it but the table and a few chairs. There were four windows, all boarded up. Shayne listened, but he could hear nothing except the surf.

When they were alone Perdido lighted a long cigarette. The gangster had his cigarettes custom made. He put one into Shayne's mouth and lighted it.

He made no move to untie the redhead.

"Okay, Shayne. Now we talk."

"I don't talk so well with my hands tied," Shayne said.

"I don't want no trouble. You stay tied. Besides, all you really got to do is listen."

"That figures," Shayne said.

"I hear you're working for Georgie Gatling."

"You hear right," Shayne said. "Are you for that or against it?"

Perdido smoked and watched the detective through narrowed dark eyes. The gangster's face did not seem quite as handsome all of a sudden.

"That depends, peeper," Perdido said. "I don't like to see Georgie go up for a bad rap. Only maybe it wouldn't be so bad for me, you know? I mean, Georgie he knows a lot."

"So he told me himself," Shayne said. "Maybe you decided to help him out of circulation."

"A frame? Listen, peeper, if I want to put a guy out of circulation I got a lot better ways. I mean, this is a rotten frame."

"Besides," Shayne said, "he might talk his head off if he got framed, right?"

Perdido's eyes narrowed farther. The powerful racketeer watched Mike Shayne with what was not exactly a friendly look. Perdido seemed to be thinking very hard. The effort showed on his handsome face.

"He don't talk, Shayne, no matter what. He knows that."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure, peeper. A jail don't protect a guy from Tony Perdido."

Shayne guessed that this was close to the truth, yet he had the feeling that Perdido was worried. He thought he could guess why. Gatling was a smart lawyer; the accused man probably had a letter hidden somewhere that would ruin Perdido. That was only a wise insurance policy. But he decided to play along for now.

"Okay, Tony. Then what's on your mind?"

Perdido smoked. "Gatling, he done a lot of work for me, maybe not all so legit, right? Now you go poking around looking for a frame against Georgie and maybe you find some stuff that ain't so good for me. See? I mean, I don't like no private cop poking around in things maybe don't smell so good for me."

Shayne nodded. Perdido had a point. He might very well find out some things about Perdido if he kept digging into Gatling's history.

"You want to make sure I go blind if I run into stuff that involves you," Shayne said.

"I always said you was a smart man," Perdido said.

"Okay, for now I'll keep clean on anything I happen to find. As long as you aren't involved in the frame-up."

"Fair enough. I got nothing to worry about," Perdido said.

"You're sure you didn't decide to heist that seventy-five thousand dollars and lay it on Gatling?"

"Me? For seventy-five thousand dollars? Hell, Shayne, that kind of peanuts I make a week on the numbers. No, peeper, I didn't know from nothing about that cash."

"What about Doris Field?"

Perdido laughed. "Sure, I knew about the chick. Hell, Shayne, it's my business to know what guys who work for me are up to, yeah? How do you think I found you tonight?"

Shayne nodded thoughtfully. "I was wondering about that."

"Hell, I've known all about that chick ever since Georgie latched onto her. Nice, that, yeah? I mean, that I'd like a try at myself. Maybe I will, if Georgie gets hung on this rap."

"That gives you another reason for wanting Gatling locked up on this," Shayne said.

Perdido continued to smoke. The gangster seemed to be studying Shayne and making up his mind about something at the same time. At last Perdido folded his manicured hands and leaned toward Shayne.

"So we got a deal. I mean, you go real careful what you find out and what you tell. I mean, I don't want no trouble. You try anything, I'll give you trouble, but I don't want none if I can stay clear. That's how I stay clean. No waves, yeah?"

"Unless I find you in on it," Shayne said.

Perdido stared and then laughed. "You got guts, I give you that. I got you hanging by your thumbs, and you make conditions. Okay, I'll buy that deal. And I'll throw in a favor on top of it."

Shayne studied the gangster. "A favor?"

"Yeh," Perdido said, nodded. "Like I said, I got to keep pretty good tabs on people works for me. That means real good tabs, yeah?"

"All right," Shayne said. "You keep tabs."

"Yeah. Okay, so I know something maybe you don't know. Even Gatling don't know this bit. I ain't mentioned it to the cops because I figure it would just about cook Georgie. Besides, I don't go around talking to cops."

"Cook him?" Shayne said. "Then why tell me?"

"The cops'd maybe say it cooks him," Perdido said, "only me, I figure maybe there's another angle to it. I figure you'll get the other angle, too."

"I'm on pins-and-needles," Shayne said.

"Well, I know a little piece of dirt, yeah? You know that Joe Pinker guy Georgie was supposed to of burned? Well, that dead guy was having one hell of a good time with Verna, Georgie's wife!"

Shayne could feel his breath slow, almost stop, and then start beating fast. If true, Tony Perdido had a bombshell. It would be just about all Painter and Sheriff Dade would need to finish Gatling—his wife's sweetheart. No matter how

much a man plays himself, he never wants his wife to play.

"You're sure?" Shayne said.

"You ever know me to have the wrong ear? My boys, they keep an eye on Georgie. So they keep an eye on his broad, too. Been going on maybe a year, maybe more. They're real careful, not much staying in motels. I think it was true love."

Perdido laughed. The gangster had never known, or seen, true love in his life, and he never would. To Perdido women were an hour of bed, maybe two, and back to important matters. Only a sucker settled for one woman.

But Shayne had another matter on his mind. He had what might be the answer. Perdido saw it, too. It was the answer to the one big question: how Verna, who would be the one most logical to know about Doris Field, had learned about the seventy-five thousand dollars! Pinker told her!

Pinker knew about the money. Verna knew about Doris and the phony fishing trips. Together they had everything needed to make the frame-up! Now all he had to do was prove that they really did it—together!

And why Verna killed Pinker?

"You like it, peeper?" Perdido said, watching him.

Shayne nodded. "Maybe. It could answer a lot of questions."

"That's what I figured. You want more?"

"Is there more?"

"Yeh, a bonus. One of my boys spotted a fellow watching Doris Field's place a while back. Blonde guy, tall."

"Pinker?"

"I ain't swearing it. Only I figure someone knew about the little broad and Gatling," Perdido said.

Shayne tugged on his ear. "Your boys wouldn't have been around to see the murder, would they?"

"Sorry, Shayne. My boys only follow Georgie, and he wasn't there," Perdido said. "Anyway, Georgie give us the slip that day."

"Too bad you can't swear to him being in Sentry."

"All he needs is me as a witness," Perdido said. "They'd hang him twice."

Shayne silently agreed. But his mind was really working on the sudden clicking into place of just what he needed. Verna Gatling was the logical one to have done the frame-up, and Joe Pinker knew about the money. The two of them together, that was the final piece in the puzzle. Now all he had to do was prove it, and try to figure just why Verna had killed Pinker. It couldn't be for the money—Verna had plenty. Had Pinker just used her to help him frame Gatling?

"You ain't gonna forget about keeping me out of it?" Perdido said.

"I'll keep you out, Tony—this time," Shayne said.

Perdido grinned. "You get me on something real, I'll send you

flowers." And the handsome hood called to his men. "Get in here."

The small army of punks came back into the shack. They still had not smiled at all, not once. Perdido motioned toward Mike Shayne.

"Fix him up again and take him back."

Gagged and blindfolded again, Shayne was hustled out to the waiting black car. They went back through the sand, over the dirt road, and along the highway. The drive seemed longer this time. The car moved more slowly, and Shayne was anxious. But at last it stopped. Hands pushed him out and untied him. The car roared away.

By the time he had removed the gag and blindfold, he saw nothing more than the red taillights of the car racing away. He was standing exactly beside his own car on the deserted early morning streets of Sentry. He noticed what looked like a light in Doris Field's house, but when he looked more closely, the light was gone.

He got into his car and drove to the first motel to get at least a few hours sleep.

IX

THE SUN was high outside the window of the motel room when Mike Shayne awakened.

The redhead looked at his watch. It was almost eleven. Two days without much sleep had told and he had slept too long. He reached for a cigarette, lighted it, and lay in the bed, thinking.

Now the frame was clear. Verna knew about Doris Field, knew about Gatling's little trick each weekend. So she faked the call to the captain, and Pinker picked up the red car. He wore a dark wig, mustache, and dark glasses. He drove to River Bluff, stopping purposely but staying inside the dark car.

Verna followed behind with her picture of Gatling. When she showed it to the witnesses, and described the red convertible, the witnesses all were sure they had seen Gatling. Then it was Pinker who did the robbery of the safe, still disguised as Gatling. He slugged the watchman and went back to where he had parked the red car.

The red convertible had been very conveniently left where some people were sure to see it. Joe Pinker then chucked his disguise and appeared at the red car. The plan, obviously, was to drive back to Miami and leave the car with its incriminating evidence.

Gatling would have no reason to suspect, and when he came back from Sentry, he would simply drive the red car home as if returning from his fishing. Verna must have cased his actions with Doris and known there was just about no chance of anyone seeing him, and that the testimony of Doris Field would be useless.

With everyone knowing Gatling

needed money, the frame should hold up. But something had to have gone wrong. Joseph Pinker was murdered.

The killer had to be Verna Gatling. But why?

Shayne lighted another cigarette and pondered this. He could come up with no answer on the facts he had. Probably Joseph Pinker was out to cross her in some way. Maybe she just learned he didn't really love her. Anyway, she must have killed him, and been shrewd enough to know that the gun in the car would be too much.

The reason would have to be found later. Just now he saw another problem, one that would prove his case. With Pinker dead, Verna would have had two cars and only one driver, herself. The killing was probably unexpected, so she would have to have improvised some plan to get the red convertible back to Miami.

The whole frame-up depended on Gatling returning in the red car, and on Verna being back in Miami with her own car in reasonable time. She claimed she had lost the red car, but that was clearly a lie now. One of the sets of tire tracks near the scene must have been those of her car.

Somehow, out there near the warehouse with a dead man and two cars, she had managed to get them both back to Miami. There could have been a third party, but Shayne doubted it—two was already a lot for a successful frame-up.

He got up, ordered breakfast from the motel diner, and went to shave. As he looked at his gaunt face with the heavy red stubble and ragged shock of red hair, he went over the ways a person faced with two cars on a lonely road could get them both back to Miami.

First, drive off the red car—it was the one she would have wanted to hide. And she might have driven that back to Miami first, but Shayne doubted that. To make her story of losing the red car and going straight on home, she had to be back in her own car in reasonable time. Her maid would certainly say that her mistress had reported home at a proper hour, and gone to bed.

So she would have driven the red car into some hiding place—perhaps the third set of tire tracks? No, that would mean she would have to return for the red car and risk someone seeing her with the red car.

First, she drove the red car into River Bluff and hid it. Then she had to get back to her own car, drive it back to Miami. In Miami she would return home, go to bed, sneak back out and return to River Bluff. There she would pick up the red car and drive it back to Miami and the spot near the bay.

That meant two possible points of checking. One, someone would have to have taken her back out to her own car near the warehouse. It

was a good ten miles from River Bluff. Second, to get back to River Bluff in time to get the red car, she would probably have used a plane —a charter plane for such a short hop to such a small town.

Over his breakfast Shayne decided, reluctantly, that he would have to use Sheriff Matt Dade. The ways to get back out to her car from River Bluff would not be many, but too many for one man to check, especially since she could have gone the other way.

He paid his motel bill and left on the road back to River Bluff. On the way he considered the ways she could have used. First, a taxi. Second, hitchhiking. Third, some service station vehicle after, say, flattening her tire. Fourth, paying some stranger to drive her. Of these, the second and the fourth were very risky.

Hitchhiking was frowned on in this part of the state, and, anyway, a man who picked up a pretty woman might remember her too well. Also, it did not allow her control over the time, and time was a big factor at that point.

Paying a stranger laid her open to much too much identification. A stranger, paid, might very well talk about her when the murder came out. No, that was not it.

Which left a taxi and a faked flat tire for a gas station man to help. Both had their risks. The spot was out of the way, and someone might wonder. But she could probably

have made up a plausible story. All-in-all, though, a faked flat tire and a story of hiking into the station, would have been most safe. No attendant would be likely to remember one customer.

On the other hand, the service station man would have had to drive her straight to her car, while in a taxi she could have gotten out a mile away and walked. She was in a bind, if he had it reasoned right, and some risk was unavoidable at that point. A risk that would, in the end, trap her!

He reached River Bluff just after lunch. Sheriff Dade was in his office picking his teeth. Dade half rose, and half clenched his fists as Shayne strode into the office. But Shayne told him what he wanted, and the big man calmed down. Shayne explained what he was looking for—a woman who had

taken a cab or gone to a gas station for a ride.

"A woman? You think Gatling's woman helped him?" Dade said, trying to look intelligent.

"I think so," Shayne said, lying calmly. "It looks like it might have been a two-person job. You noted those extra tire tracks, of course."

"Yeah, sure," Dade said, obviously having not noticed the extra tire tracks.

"So you'll take the taxi drivers, and some of your men can check the gas stations in town," Shayne said. "And I'll check the stations the other way."

"Right," Dade said, all efficiency, now that Mike Shayne was seeking his valuable help.

Shayne returned along the road toward Sentry, past the warehouse. He did not think he would find much out this way, but he wanted to try. As he had expected, he found no gas station or garage that had driven a woman back to a car near the warehouse.

There were two villages close by, but the single taxi in each village remembered no woman fare in that direction on Saturday night. Shayne drove back, noting again that the clump of trees were visible where the red convertible had been parked.

He noted something else, and stopped.

He studied the terrain carefully. He was right. From the spot where one of the other two cars had parked, the red convertible would not have been visible. In fact it would not have been possible to see the red car from where either car had been parked, and the red convertible driver could not have seen the other two cars.

For a long time he stood and looked at the tracks of the third car.

Then he drove back into River Bluff. Sheriff Dade was sitting in his office. The big sheriff looked extremely pleased with himself. He was not alone. Standing nervously in front of Dade's desk, his hat in his hand like a political prisoner in front of the Gestapo, was a small old man who continually licked his lips.

"No luck, Shayne?" Dade said complacently.

"No, but I see you had luck," Shayne said.

Dade guffawed. "You so right, buddy boy. This here is Ben Bullin —drives a taxi down by the station. Tell him, Ben."

The old man twisted his hat and licked his lips. It was clear that if Ben Bullin could have found a way out he would have run faster than Peter Snell in his prime. The old man's voice was hoarse.

"This lady come up to me and hired the taxi to take her out on the road to Sentry. I wondered 'cause they ain't nothin' out thataway. She said her car was stalled and she had to go get it. Well, sir, I dropped her off 'bout half a mile

'tother side the warehouse was robbed. Course, I didn't know nothin' 'bout that then, not at that time at—"

"Hold it down, Ben," Dade snapped. "Police work ain't your line. Now you tell Shayne about seein' no car."

The old man nodded. "That true. I didn't see no car. She said it was down a side road a piece, only she wanted to walk. I ain't one to argue with no lady."

Shayne nodded. "Thanks a lot, Mr. Bullin. Now if—"

He was about to court disaster for having lied to Dade when the sheriff broke in with a big grin.

"Tell him the rest, Ben," Dade said.

"There's still more?" Shayne snapped.

"There sure is," Dade said. "Go on, Ben. Tell him."

The old man cleared his throat, "Well, maybe about six hours later, real early in the morning, one of our boys picked up a woman at the airport. I'd told him about mine, see? Well we sort of compared notes, and danged if it don't sound like the same lady!"

The old man delivered his bombshell like a Japanese admiral reporting on Pearl Harbor. Shayne guessed that not a lot ever happened around River Bluff's taxi company. That was another mistake Verna Gatling had made. Shayne now showed Bullin the picture he had of Verna Gatling.

"Yeah. That's her, sure enough!" Bullin croaked.

Dade reached for the picture and turned beet red. The big sheriff then turned purple. When his voice came it was a roar that could have been heard as far north as Atlanta.

"Damn it, Shayne, that's Verna Gatling! What the hell you tryin' to pull, buddy boy!"

Shayne calmed the sheriff down and explained what he was trying to pull. Dade shooed old Ben Bullin out and listened with his mouth hanging open. When Shayne had finished, Dade was almost speechless for the first time—but not quite.

"Verna and Joe Pinker? A frame?" Dade said.

"I don't see how we can get around it. I'll check the airport, but I don't have to be psychic to know that she hired that plane in Miami early Sunday morning. It wouldn't take more than twenty minutes all told to get up here that way."

"But damn it, Shayne," Dade cried, his full voice back now. "Verna and Joe were real close! I mean, they was serious. We all knew that. Joe was single; they'd of married if it wasn't that Gatling wouldn't let go of her loot. She wouldn't kill Joe!"

Shayne rubbed his chin. "You all knew it? Who is all?"

"Everyone! McNamara, Algood, me! Half the county. She didn't go around hiding it. Why should she with a man like Gatling?"

"That isn't what Tony Perdido said," Shayne mused aloud more than half to himself.

"Perdido? That punk? Hell, he'd lie on his mother's grave. Oh, I ain't saying we all exactly knew—they was on the up-and-up, if you know what I mean. But we was pretty sure. Why the hell would she kill Joe?"

"I don't know. Maybe Joe needed money, tried to cross her and take the money," Shayne said. "Did Pinker need money?"

"Hell, I don't know."

"Maybe we better find out. I tell you what—it's about time Chief Painter brought Gatling up here. The case is in your county. Tell Painter to bring him tomorrow morning, and bring Verna and her father, Rogers Sinclair. Then you get Algood and McNamara."

"What are you gonna do?"

"First I'm going to check the airport to be sure. Then I'm going over to Sentry to get Doris Field."

"Why her?"

"She's important, Sheriff. After all, she's Gatling's only alibi."

With that, Mike Shayne left the River Bluff sheriff's office and drove out of town toward the airport.

X

AT THE airport three charter pilots identified the picture of Verna Gatling as the woman who had chartered a plane in Miami at about four o'clock Sunday morning for a flight to River Bluff. She had given a phony name, but they remembered her. She had seemed nervous.

In his car again, Shayne knew that that just about closed the lid on the frame-up. Still, it was not going to be an open and shut case, not until the money was found, which might be never. Verna Gatling didn't need the money; she may have just thrown it away.

He drove fast and considered the frame-up. Obviously the reason was to get rid of George Gatling. Verna had tried the divorce route, and when that failed, she decided to frame Gatling into prison or the death cell. Except that the death cell, the murder, had to have been an afterthought. The mere robbery would have been enough.

Shayne almost drove off the road. A thought had gone very quietly through his mind—as quiet as a razor. The robbery would have been enough! And Tony Perdido had lied, more or less. Tony Perdido had volunteered the information about Verna and Pinker. Perhaps Shayne would have found that out sooner or later, although no one had mentioned it, but Perdido had volunteered the facts.

Grimly now, Shayne drove on into Sentry. The town was a little more awake in the late afternoon than it had been earlier that day. The sight of the town made him suddenly feel sad again about

Doris Field. It was a hell of a town to be born beautiful and poor in. Some got out, but not everyone had either the strength or the talent or the luck. Doris was one of the unlucky ones, perhaps more unlucky than even she knew.

It being a work day, he had to wait until after five-thirty when her office closed. As beautiful as ever, she walked out and he hailed her from his car.

She came over.

"Get in," Shayne said.

The girl shrugged. Her fellow workers were staring. Shayne saw another of her troubles—the other women were smirking and clucking at the same time. Doris, the bad woman—and here to prove it was another not-too-young stranger.

"Have you found anything?" Doris said when she was seated and Shayne had driven off toward her house.

"I think I've solved the frame-up," he said, and explained most of it.

The girl was ecstatic. "That awful wife! I knew George was innocent, oh, I knew. Will they let him out now?"

"There has to be an inquiry over at River Bluff. They need your testimoney. You are his alibi."

"Of course! Now they'll believe me!"

"Yes, they'll believe you now," he said, and then, "How do you feel?"

"Feel? I feel fine!"

"I remember you said you were sick on Saturday night."

"Oh, that. Just a bad stomach cramp. I get them. I slept it off."

"Okay by Sunday?"

She nodded. "I had a headache, but that was all. We had a lovely day, George and I, before he went home and all this happened. Oh that awful woman!"

"I tell you what—you go home and freshen up. Pack a bag and I'll drive you over to River Bluff tonight. You can stay at a motel and be ready in the morning."

"All right," she said. "Where are you going?"

"I have to make a call," he said.

Once she was out of the way, he drove to the only car-rental in town. After that he returned and picked Doris up and they drove back to River Bluff.

It was dark by the time they arrived, and Mike Shayne went to the motel and got the first good night's sleep he had had in three days.

XI

THE OFFICE of the jail was bright with sun. They all sat there trying to smile, but not succeeding. Peter Painter seemed more than annoyed. The dapper Miami Beach chief of detectives had had to get up early to bring Gatling and he was not happy.

"What the devil are you up to, Shayne?" Painter snapped. It always annoyed the little chief to be out of his own jurisdiction.

Sheriff Dade looked like he would have liked to ask the same question if he had not been so busy trying to appear as if he already knew all the answers. McNamara was the only really calm person in the room. The president of the trucking company sat relaxed, with a faint smile on his face.

"What I'm up to is what you should have been up to, Painter," Shayne said bluntly. "I'm going to prove a very interesting frame-up."

George Gatling was nervous, had been nervous since Painter had led him in with the handcuffs on his wrists. From time to time the lawyer licked his lips. Now, as Mike Shayne spoke, he tried to smile, but the days in jail seemed to have made him lose most of his hope.

"We got it cold, you heah?" Dade said importantly.

Algood watched the big sheriff with a peculiar mixture of fear and curiosity. Doris Field sat as close to Gatling as she could get, her hand on his arm whenever Painter was not looking. Only Verna Gatling and her father, Rogers Sinclair, betrayed nothing at all by the expressions on their faces.

Sinclair had been looking at his watch ever since he had arrived by chartered plane. "I have a plane waiting, Shayne," he snapped. "Can't we get on with whatever this is all about? I'm a busy man."

"You just hold it," Sheriff Dade said, his voice a strange blend of his usual surliness and arrogance, mixed with a certain uneasiness because Dade did know that Sinclair was both busy and important.

Gatling burst out, "For God's sake, Shayne, tell us! Do you know who framed me? Can you prove it?"

"Yes," Shayne said. "I can prove it now."

There was a sudden stir in the room. Everyone seemed to be looking at everyone else, except Verna Gatling, who was sitting very quietly and examining Shayne. Sinclair stared at his daughter.

Peter Painter swore in impatience. "Then prove it, damn it!" he said.

Shayne nodded. "Well, in the first place Gatling has an alibi, and a real one. He was with Doris Field. He could not have been driving that red convertible."

Painter snorted. "I hope you have more."

"I have, Painter, but that is the starting point. If you start with that

fact, you begin to get the picture: Gatling could not have been driving the red convertible. Then who did drive it? Obviously the driver was a man. A man of the same general build as Gatling, who, with the help of dark glasses, a wig and a fake mustache, plus never actually leaving the dark of his car, could look enough like Gatling to make people identify a picture."

Shayne paused to light a cigarette. He blew smoke and tugged slowly on his ear lobe as he looked straight at Verna Gatling.

"But the real frame-up came when the woman followed the red car. She used a picture of Gatling, plus the red car having just passed, to implant in the minds of the witnesses the certainty that they had seen Gatling. You see, the key to the frame was to have unimpeachable witnesses place Gatling in his own car very near the scene of the crime. Witnesses who had not been paid or tampered with in any way.

"You see, that is the only real case against Gatling—that he was seen in his own car on his way to River Bluff, when he claims he was over fifty miles away. Obviously, there is no reason for a gas station man and a waitress to lie. That was the really smart part of the frame-up."

Shayne blew a long stream of smoke. "The rest was really too easy, even clumsy. Gatling was an obvious suspect. The watchman was given just enough look to make him think the thief could have been Gatling, the car was left where it would be seen for sure. Given a seventy-five thousand dollar robbery, Gatling was a logical suspect. All our framer had to do was place him at the scene. The police did the rest, with a little help from a simple plant of money and tools in his car.

"Of course, the whole frame depended on two things—that the framers knew about the money, and that they knew Gatling would be fifty miles away in his hidden love nest. The whole frame-up was based on the fact that Gatling had cooked up this elaborate deception for his visits to Doris Field. Gatling played right into the framer's hands with his hidden affair, by using a hired car and leaving his own. Once he was picked up, with all those witnesses against him, who would believe his story?"

There was a silence. It was Fred McNamara who spoke at last. The president of the trucking company was grim. He looked hard at Shayne.

"You keep saying 'framers,' Shayne. More than one."

Shayne nodded. "There were two. There had to be. One to drive the car, and the woman to follow. Of course, the man had to be someone who knew about the seventy-five thousand dollars."

McNamara paled, but nodded slowly.

"Pinker," McNamara said.

"Yes," Shayne said, "Pinker. He was tall, about the same build. He just used a disguise and drove the car. He robbed the safe and slugged the watchman. Actually, I don't know whose idea it was—but probably yours, eh, Verna?"

This time the silence was thick. Gatling stared at his wife and swore softly. Everyone else looked at the woman who sat without blinking or moving.

Rogers Sinclair was the first to speak.

"Don't say anything, Verna! He doesn't have—"

"But I do have proof," Shayne said. "In the first place, once we know it was a frame-up, Verna has to be it—her actions in following the red car had to be a frame-up. But I've got more."

He looked hard at the woman. "I've got the taxi driver who drove her back to her car after she had hidden the red car. I've got a taxi driver and three charter pilots who saw her fly back to River Bluff when she was presumably sleeping at home."

There was a silence, and then Verna Gatling sighed. The woman shrugged and lighted a cigarette. She crossed her legs as if about to speak at a PTA meeting.

"It was my idea. We were in love, Joe and I, but George would never give me a divorce. I knew all about his affairs, but he is too clever to let me get any real proof. Then Joe told me about the pirating of contracts. He thought it had to be George, but he couldn't get any proof, either. Then he happened to mention the seventy-five thousand dollars, and that George knew about the money.

"I knew that George needed money badly." She let the smoke trickle from her nostrils into the silent air. "I knew he would go to visit his lady friend. I'd already trailed him once and knew all about the phony fishing trip and the hired cars. I knew how careful he was because Joe had tried to catch him once, but George never even left that house in Sentry."

Verna Gatling smiled, shrugged again. "The plan just seemed to jump into my mind. Disguise Joe to look a little like George. Have George drive the red car. Follow and fix George's face in the minds of witnesses. Make the robbery and let the watchman get a glimpse. Make sure the car was seen in those trees. Then both drive back and put the red car back near the dock with the money and some tool parts in it.

"George would drive home on Monday and swear he had been in Sentry. But the car would show five hundred miles extra; there would be all those witnesses and the evidence. Even if someone had seen George in Sentry, he wasn't known there, and against all who swore he was in River Bluff, I was pretty sure which way the police and the jury later would believe.

The whole Sentry story, including Miss Field, would sound like the phoney story."

Dade gave the room no chance to be silent this time when Verna Gatling finished. The big sheriff blurted out, "But why did you kill Joe? It don't make no—"

Verna Gatling almost laughed. A bitter laugh. "Kill Joe? Why would I kill Joe? Joe getting killed is what ruined it all. There I was with two cars and no driver. I had to get them both back to Miami, and that's how Shayne traced me. I mean, there I was; we'd done the robbery, we were guilty, and I had to get both cars back to Miami or be caught. I had to take the chance."

The woman began to cry. "Kill Joe? I loved Joe! Why would I kill him?"

It was Gatling who burst out. "Because he crossed you! He didn't love you! You expect anyone to believe you didn't kill Joe, after admitting it all?"

They all stared at Verna Gatling.

But Shayne spoke quietly. "I believe her, Gatling," Shayne said.

XII

PETER PAINTER threw up his hands in disgust. The dapper chief of detectives was red with fury.

"You prove she's guilty, now you say she isn't? Then who did kill Joseph Pinker?" Painter cried.

Sheriff Dade's watery blue eyes looked like the eyes of a man in shock. Dade was beyond his depth, far beyond. Twice the sheriff tried to speak, and no sound came out. Finally, it was McNamara who spoke.

"Everyone else has an alibi, Shayne. Verna admits she was with Joe," McNamara said.

"Yes," Shayne said. "Everyone else has an alibi. But look at it this way. First, she loved the man. Second, as far as we can tell now, Pinker had no reason to double-cross her. Third, and this is the big point that bothered me all along—the reason for the frame has to be just to get rid of Gatling. Verna doesn't need the money, and we have no proof that Pinker needed the money. No, the whole frame-up was to put Gatling behind bars, and give Verna grounds for divorce. Also, as a side issue, to punish Gatling for his double-dealing with the company."

Shayne paused to light another cigarette. He looked up at all of them. "There was no reason for killing. For any killing. In fact, as Verna said, the killing of Joseph Pinker ruined her plans. She had absolutely no reason for killing Pinker."

George Gatling seemed puzzled. "Then, Shayne, are you saying that Pinker was killed sort of by accident? Someone who caught him there at the car with the money?"

"Yes, someone caught him at the car," Shayne said.

Peter Painter was eager. "You mean you think someone shot him thinking he was just a thief? I mean, he had just committed a robbery!"

Gatling nodded. "That's logical, but it could have been anyone. McNamara, Algood. Maybe the watchman shot him and didn't realize it."

Shayne laughed. "Anyone could have, Gatling, but only one person did—you! After all, it was your gun, wasn't it? That was pretty cute, just dropping it. Made the frame look more like a frame."

Painter sputtered. "You mean? Gatling? Gatling killed Pinker *really?* For God's sake, Shayne, Gatling was fifty miles away with Doris Field!"

Shayne sighed. "Ten minutes ago you didn't believe that alibi on a stack of bibles. Now you won't disbelieve it on a stack of bibles. You said it was phony; now you say it's a pure truth."

"Now I know Gatling was framed!" Painter exploded. "So now the alibi has to be true. Damn it, Shayne, you just proved that Gatling was framed!"

"That he was," Shayne said, "and he knew it. He's a smart cookie, our Georgie. They framed him for a robbery, so he killed Pinker and framed Verna for a murder!"

Gatling roared. "My gun was in the red car and I never went near the red car!"

"Not until that night. Sure it was in the car. You took it out of the car and waited for Joe Pinker in the bushes. You must have really laughed—frame the framers! Turnabout. You made a real good gamble. Hire me to prove that you were framed, which I'd be pretty sure to do because you really were framed! And count that I wouldn't look beyond the initial frame."

Shayne laughed aloud. "It damn near worked, too. Only you made a couple of small mistakes. I don't know how you discovered their plans; probably you just heard something that made you suspicious, and then you shadowed them. Anyway, you found out what they were planning. You wanted Pinker out of the way anyway for two reasons: he was after your money-bags wife, and he suspected you of the pirating of customers.

"You didn't have to do a thing except watch that warehouse and wait. They walked right in. You drove over from Sentry Saturday night, parked down the road out of sight, and waited until Pinker appeared with the money. Then you shot him, dropped the gun, and drove back to Sentry. The rest was easy. You just played it innocent and howled frame-up. You hired me to prove it."

Shayne looked at the ashen-

faced lawyer grimly. "But you got too eager. You couldn't wait for me to discover what you knew I needed—the connection between Verna and Pinker. You sent Tony Perdido to tell me about it! Tony wouldn't really be scared of me, and no one but you could have told him to watch Doris Field's place for me.

"Tony played his part fine, but when I found out that it wasn't such a big secret about Verna and Pinker, I began to wonder why Tony insisted you didn't know. You see, Gatling, it just didn't make sense, the robbery and murder together. The robbery would have been enough to frame you. The murder didn't fit until I figured out that it was a double frame-up!"

Gatling was as white as chalk as they all looked at him. The lawyer looked at Dade, who just stared his mystification, and at Painter, who was still looking annoyed.

"I never left Sentry!" Gatling said hoarsely. "Doris will swear to that!"

"Sure she will," Shayne said. "She doesn't know that you did, although I think by now she's guessed. She had cramps, and you gave her a mickey. If it wasn't the cramps, you'd have found another excuse to drug her so she would sleep while you drove over to River Bluff. It doesn't take that long."

"My car never left the house in Sentry!" Gatling cried.

"No, but another car did. I checked with the car-rental over there. A man fitting your description rented another car about ten o'clock Saturday night. The mileage checks out for a trip to River Bluff and back. I imagine we'll find your prints in it somewhere."

"You can't prove it! I was framed! Verna framed me!" Gatling shouted, his manacled hands straining at the handcuffs.

"I can prove the car," Shayne said. "The gun was your gun with your prints. And I think Tony Perdido will tell us how you put him up to giving me information. Tony hates to back a loser. But, actually, my bet is that you'll hang yourself, Gatling."

Gatling sneered, pale as a maggot under a rock. "You're a fool if you think that, peeper!"

"Greed, Gatling—your greed will get you," Shayne said.

Suddenly, the redhead turned to face a startled and very confused-looking Doris Field. The girl had been sitting all this time hunched over as if in pain, her face growing greyer and greyer. Now her beautiful eyes looked at Mike Shayne.

"Doris, I think you guessed even before this. I think you know Gatling left the house while you were asleep. I think you've been fighting between love for him, and conscience. Doris, he's a killer. He's rotten all the way. I think you know what we need to prove it."

"Shut up, Doris!" Gatling cried.

The girl sat hunched, her face a tortured scene. She looked at Gatling and at Shayne. She looked at the others.

"He's not worth it, Doris. With what we have we might get him anyway," Shayne said. "He's a cold-blooded killer, Doris. And he's done."

The beautiful girl began to rock slowly back and forth in her chair. When she spoke her voice seemed to be far away.

"I had a headache. The next day. I never get headaches. I know about those drugs. There was dirt on the rug in the morning. Just a little, but I always clean very well before he comes to see me. We hadn't been out of the house. I guessed he'd been out. I—I didn't want to think where."

Doris looked up, stared at Shayne. "I knew what they said he had done, all that about the red car, couldn't be true. So I didn't say anything—about the drugs, the dirt on the rug. I didn't want to think about it. But now—"

Gatling cried once in fear, "Doris!"

She smiled at Shayne. "What you want, I guess, is what I saw him bury. Out back in the garden, near the fence, he buried something."

Gatling stared at her. Then his face was not a face at all, it was incarnate hatred. "You bitch! You lousy stupid bitch! You filthy tramp! You—"

Peter Painter swore. "What the hell did he bury?"

"The money, Painter," Shayne said. "He buried the money! Greed, he's just too damned greedy!"

The money was found buried where Doris Field had said. The man at the car rental made an identification. The tire tracks of the third car at the scene matched the rented car. Gatlings' prints were found in the car—and his shoes showed tiny traces of blood.

In Miami Beach, Shayne had to go and sign a statement. Peter Painter watched the big redhead.

"I got to admit," Painter said, "he almost fooled me."

"He figured no one would look beyond the initial frame-up. It was a hell of a clever idea," Shayne said. "But he'll burn now, if Dade can get the case straight."

Painter was thoughtful. "It was a great idea; I'll give him that. Start out with everyone sure you're guilty; then, when the frame-up is proved, no one will even consider you as a suspect again. I admit it, Shayne, if it was me I'd have never looked into his alibi again."

Shayne signed his statement. He didn't like Painter, but he had to admit that the dapper little cop was a fair and honest man when he had to be. Painter could admit a mistake, and that was a hell of a lot. Lucky for the cause of law and order, Doris Field could admit a mistake, too.

The Chastity Room

by AUBREY S. NEWMAN

A bride lay dead in her locked room. It had to be suicide, of course, he knew. And yet . . .

LIEUTENANT LUCAS MCWIGGINS of the Army military police, home on leave from Fort Braxton, folded his powerful six-feet-two into a chair and answered the telephone. A metallic voice crackled through the receiver: "This is Sergeant Mosely Abbott, Lieutenant.

In the military police at Fort Braxton, until I retired a year ago. Remember?"

"Sergeant Abbott! When can I see you?"

"That's why I'm calling, Lieutenant. I heard you were visiting your folks, so planned to drive over—it's only twenty miles. But a sudden emergency has tied me down."

Sergeant Abbott paused, then continued:

"I went back to live in my home town of Mohican City, and just got myself elected sheriff. Now, this morning, there is a killing on my hands—the young wife of a rich older man.

"At least I think it's murder, but it looks like suicide. It's one of those locked room deals; it don't smell right to me.

"I remember the way you solved that murder at Fort Braxton —so how about giving an old soldier a little detective help?" There was a chuckle on the phone. "I know how you work, Lieutenant. There's a bottle of bourbon waiting to grease the wheels."

SHERIFF ABBOTT matched Lucas in height but, unlike Lucas, his girth exceeded his chest measure. He pulled up a comfortable seat for his visitor and came right to the point.

"Her name is Agnes Sandlin. She is—was twenty-four," he said. "Local girl, college beauty queen at Yarmouth. She was engaged to a young Air Force pilot whose plane crashed in the Vietnam jungles. Later, believing her fiance dead, she married Gordon Sandlin, wealthy local business man twice her age.

"Gordon Sandlin inherited money, made more. Lived alone in a brick house surrounded by extensive grounds five miles out of town. A loner with few close friends, he is an antique furniture bug, even does his own repair and refinishing. Used to have another hobby too—women. He had a bad reputation as a chaser. He never married until about a year and a half ago, when he was past forty.

"Town gossip says it was a reasonably happy marriage for a year. Then her former fiance, the Air Force pilot, turned up alive. He'd been a prisoner. That's when the popcorn hit the fan in the Sandlin family. Her former fiance dead didn't bother Gordon, but with him alive Gordon turned into a green-eyed dragon. According to rumor started by the maid, Martha Reagan—a real biddy in her own right —Gordon got the idea Agnes had seen her former fiance secretly and that she planned to leave him.

"Anyway, he reported prowlers around his place, then remodeled an upstairs bedroom. The idea was to provide a secure place where Agnes could lock herself in when Gordon was away on overnight business trips. There was

even a pistol in the bedside table drawer.

"Pretty soon scuttlebut from Martha Reagan said the security room was not so much to keep prowlers out as to keep Agnes in—that Gordon locked her in when he was away. The chastity belt idea of medieval Europe, only this was a chastity room."

Mosely Abbott rocked silently in his swivel chair for several minutes then said, "Lieutenant, Gordon Sandlin may be just enough of an odd-ball to build a chastity room. Further, he may have used it that way too. Wait until you see it. However, with her fiance come back to life, we can't rule out suicide. It looks like that's all it can be.

"Still the locked room is Gordon's only alibi, and there's a fishy smell about it to me." The sheriff heaved his massive body out of the swivel chair, reached for his hat. "Now we'll go out there. Maybe you can discover a solution I can't see."

MOSELY ABBOTT drove his car into the shaded driveway, stopped opposite the old fashioned white columns of the large two-story brick home.

"Harris," he said to a uniformed guard at the door, "ask Mr. Sandlin to meet us in the library."

Gordon Sandlin stopped just inside the library door, stared at Sheriff Abbott with expressionless gray eyes. Slender and of medium height, his head jutted forward over his chest and gave him a furtive, yet aggressive look, probably because his eyes seldom blinked. He sat down, ignoring Lucas when the sheriff introduced him.

"Gordon," the sheriff said, "tell me again where you were and what you did from six o'clock yesterday evening until I saw you this morning."

When Gordon Sandlin spoke his voice was thin, dry and cold. "Like a snake talking," Lucas thought.

"As I told you before," he began, "Agnes fixed herself an early snack and went to her room around six-thirty. I left after that for my weekly poker game at the club. When I got home around eleven-thirty her light was out. Knowing Agnes would be locked in—we have had prowlers you know—I went to bed across the hall.

"When I took Agnes an early cup of coffee at six this morning, the door was locked and she did not answer. So I got the ladder, looked in the window—and could see she had shot herself. And that's when I called you."

Gordon kept his unblinking eyes on Sheriff Abbott, then added in his cold, dry voice, "Sheriff, you still have the room guarded and, under pretense of investigation, have denied me permission to turn the body over for decent funeral arrangements. Investigation of what? My wife obviously took her own life? I will see you answer for

such unjustified, high-handed procedure."

Lucas McWiggins knew now why things did not smell right to Mosely Abbott. He too sensed an invisible evil miasma in this house, emanating from its queer owner with his unblinking eyes.

Sheriff Abbott stopped in the upstairs hall beside a square hole sawed in the bedroom wall. "Notice the chastity room is the upper rear corner of this wing," he said. "With Gordon Sandlin's permission, we sawed this hole as the easiest and quickest way in."

The blonde young woman lay as though asleep in the great old fashioned bed.

But there was a blackish-red bullet hole in her right temple, blood on the pillow, and a waxy look on her face.

After careful study McWiggins decided the death weapon, a snub-nosed .22 revolver, was lying where it would logically fall if she had shot herself. Further, the location of the bullet wound and the angle of entry fitted that pattern. Five of the six revolver cylinders had been loaded; an empty shell was still in the cylinder where it had been fired. Lack of powder marks showed other cylinders had not been fired.

When his eyes swept the area around the bed, Lucas noticed a tiny object on the floor. It was about the size of a grain of rice; it looked like a crumble of pipe tobacco. He brushed the brown grain into an envelope.

"I suggest your laboratory people determine what that is, Sheriff," he said as he turned away from the body, his mind busy with a possibility that little brown crumble suggested. "Also I would like to know if a paraffin test on her right hand shows she fired the pistol."

The large old fashioned room had been renovated lately, when converted to its supposed purpose, a secure place against prowlers for Gordon Sandlin's wife while he was away at night. It was really a modern efficiency apartment, with bath and stocked medicine cabinet, kitchenette with refrigerator and foodstuffs, and living area.

Martha Reagan was right, Lucas decided: this looked like a room where a wife could be locked up for safekeeping. Locked up for a long time if necessary.

There was no evidence of a concealed exit in the freshly plastered walls and ceiling, or the waxed hardwood floor. The door, designed to resist forcible entry, was sheathed with painted-over sheet steel and swung on tamper-proof hinges. In addition to the regular lock, two heavy hasps secured the door on the inside, one above the knob and one below it. Both had been fastened.

Wrought iron grills of half inch thick rods, curved in ornamental designs to avoid a cell-like look, covered the two windows. Securing

a hammer, Lucas struck the rods sharply. The only results were grayish spots where blows landed on black paint.

He turned to Mosely Abbott and said, "I accept your invitation to be an overnight house guest, Sheriff."

Later, Lieutenant Lucas McWiggins and Master Sergeant Abbott, US Army retired, sat in front of the cheerful open fire and reminisced of their service together. Finally Mosely Abbott set his glass down with decision.

"I heard them two lieutenant friends of yours at Fort Braxton talking about how you couldn't solve that murder case until you belted the bottle and came up with the answers. Meaning no offense, Lieutenant—the damned stuff never seemed to make nobody else smarter, so why do you figure it works that way for you?"

Lucas grinned, reached for the bottle, poured a heavy slug, filled the glass from a pitcher of water.

"It's this way, Sergeant—I mean Sheriff. When I was stalled for a solution on that murder case at Fort Braxton, I remembered a fellow named Edgar Allen Poe used to lubricate his imagination. The results included such classics as *The Raven, The Gold Bug,* and *The Murders In The Rue Morgue.* So I figured that what worked for Edgar might work for Lucas."

The sheriff levered his heavy body to his feet, looked down at

Lucas with his troubled smile. "I hope you and the bottle find the answer before morning, Lieutenant. Otherwise Gordon Sandlin and his money pull enough weight around here to cause me real trouble."

The fire burned to glowing embers, the liquid level in the bottle neared the bottom. And still no answer. Absently Lucas placed a notebook on the arm of his chair in the dim light from a nearby shaded lamp. Slowly he sketched the framework of a window in rough uneven lines. Then the ornamental pattern of the wrought iron grill.

Suddenly he sat up straight, eyes hard on the sketch. "That's the answer!" he said in his big man's slurring drawl. "Sheriff Mosley Abbott can rest easy now."

He lifted his glass toward the darkest corner of the room. "Here's to you, Edgar—your system works for me too!"

At mid-morning next day Lucas

McWiggins stood in the room where Agnes Sandlin had died. Present also were Sheriff Abbott, one of his deputies, and Gordon Sandlin.

Lucas moved to one window and chalk-marked sections at two places on the ornamental wrought iron grill, near the window sill. As he stepped back the deputy moved up with a can of paint remover and a rag. Quickly he applied the liquid to the marked areas, wiped them clean so the raw metal showed.

Lucas glanced at the sheriff's worried frown, noticed a glisten of sweat on his forehead. But he also saw that Gordon Sandlin's face had turned a sickly greenish white.

On the second window the paint remover uncovered thin lines of a darker shade, which circled two metal rods on the grill in cleaned areas near the window sill.

"Look, Sheriff!" Lucas said, pointing to the thin collars. "The murderer cut through these rods where the dark lines are—easy to do with a hack saw since this is wrought iron, not steel. The grill can then swing outward, pivoted near the top. Thus a man could leave the room through this window."

McWiggins paused to allow time for the mental picture to form. "To put that grill together again is equally simple," he continued. "Especially for Mr. Sandlin, skilled at antique furniture repair, who has tools and the ability to use them. Also a knowledge of glues and how to apply them, using one of the modern metal so-called miracle glues."

Lucas paused again to let the idea crystallize. He looked directly at Gordon Sandlin, "Shortly before leaving for your poker game you walked in and shot your wife. Placing everything in a suicide arrangement, you left by the window, rejoining the rods with clamps and some miracle glue, then went to your poker game.

"On your return home, the glue having set, you removed the clamps and smoothed down any roughness with abrasives, then repainted the grill with quick drying paint. This morning you reported her a suicide."

Gordon Sandlin spat out, "Distorted theory—trying to frame me!"

"In being too clever, Mr. Sandlin, you have created added evidence against yourself," Lucas replied. "After shooting your wife you replaced the empty shell with a live one, in the same cylinder. Then placing your wife's hand around the pistol, to insure a positive paraffin test, you fired the little gun into a chunk of oak firewood which you brought along for the purpose.

"A fragment of material on the floor near the bed has been identified by the police laboratory as a piece of bark from an oak tree.

Like the wood you burn in your library fireplace."

Lucas then turned to Mosely Abbott and said, "He should have burned that chunk, or ditched it somewhere, but my guess is that in his hurry to get to the poker game he simply tossed it back on the wood pile. With a metal detector, and a little patience, it should not be hard to locate."

A flash of white caught the corner of Lucas' eye as Gordon raised a handkerchief to his face. But he did not recognize the fatal possibility in that movement until Gordon Sandlin's body slumped to the floor. Then, understanding, Lucas dropped to his knees beside the body, its protruding eyes now unblinking forever.

One sniff near the distorted face was enough.

"Bitter almonds—potassium cyanide!" he said.

Still on his knees, Lucas' drawl had become the sharp clipped voice of a professional soldier as he added, "We'll never know whether Agnes Sandlin had seen her former fiance secretly, or planned to leave Gordon. It doesn't matter. What counted was what Gordon Sandlin thought. Further, I doubt he locked her in, or that Agnes would have accepted that."

Lucas McWiggins rose heavily to his feet. "I was ready to give up, Sheriff, until I realized it was almost certainly murder. To fire a bullet into her own head is not a woman's method of suicide, especially when there is a bottle of sleeping pills in the medicine cabinet.

"This infernally designed place was never intended as a security room against prowlers, or as a chastity room. Those ideas were smoke screens, for it was planned as a phony suicide murder room. And, like the venomous snake he was, the murderer ended up caught in his own death trap."

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TWO FOR ONE

"Here is twenty-five grand, Mr. Kar. You are a paid killer, a very good one, I hear. Frankly, I want you to kill a man—me!"

by MAX VAN DERVEER

THE BARBER'S white teeth flashed in a wide grin, creasing a round face that had been permanently browned by exposure to Panhandle sun. "There you are, Mr. Kar," he said, flipping the protective cloth from me.

I gave him a dollar and a quarter and he chided, "Don't you-all be so long comin' in this place again, hear?"

"Sure nuff, Roy Bob," I said in my native Southwestern twang I'd been allowed to use the last sixteen days.

"Next," said the barber. I saw a bovine rancher heave up from the row of waiting chairs. The last words I heard belonged to the barber: "That feller 'head of you," he said. "That was Kevin Kar. Writes them spy stories. Lives right here in Amarillo, but he travels a lot, too. Fact is, he was jus' tellin' me he's been up there in New York—"

I walked out of hearing range.

FEATURING

KEVIN KAR

The hot June sun and wind washed against me. I silently reveled in both. I smiled. Sixteen days of sunshine and dry air high on the Caprock had settled my nerves, melted the tension from my muscles. I felt great, better than I had felt in a long time. But there was a shadow lurking in the back of my mind, too. Was there to be a seventeenth day, an eighteenth, before I again was summoned to the business of helping the world survive?

When I walked into my duplex unit, I found there was not. Honeybelle's head was turned.

Honeybelle is a tiny black statuette of a naked and busty African female. She occupies a queenly position on the shelf over my desk and typewriter. The shelf is the only mar against the flatness of the wall and Honeybelle is its lone occupant. Normally she stands regal with her head turned in a half profile to her right. Now her head was turned in a half profile to her left.

The turning had been triggered by the invisible telephonic light in the wall behind her. That light is operated only from an inconspicuous office that is the hub of Washington's most secreted bureau, and Honeybelles' position meant there was a message.

A familiar weight settled on me. My vacation was ended. I went into the bedroom and unscrewed the left knob from the middle drawer of the dresser. Then I stared expectantly on the dresser mirror without seeing my reflection. The curt taped message from Washington came from the mirror: "One sixty-seven." Pause. "Forty-three." Pause. "Immediately. Holly."

I continued to stare on the mirror for a moment while I digested the message. I'd been given a code number instead of a code name: one sixty-seven. It meant I was to use my true name. Forty-three was a Midwest city in the United States where I was wanted immediately, and the chief of the D.C. Bureau, by ending the message with his name, had demanded confirmation.

I went to the telephone, got the air reservation I needed on a flight leaving the city at four-twenty that afternoon, returned to the mirror, spoke into it, relaying my method of travel, departure and arrival times, then replaced the drawer knob.

I looked at my wrist watch. It was a few minutes before two o'clock. I went into the kitchen. My mind was blank to the kind of job ahead. I wouldn't be told the nature of that assignment until I had reached Forty-three, but I couldn't help wondering if Sandy Miller was being sent there too. We had been partners on my last assignment.

I grinned at the memory of her sleek hips and trim calves and touched the special spot on the side of the refrigerator. The refrigera-

tor lifted silently a few inches from the floor and turned in the slow half circle.

I opened the door on the back of the refrigerator to the cache of weapons, removed the tear gas ring and the conventional gun, the cigarette package transmitter and receiver, the lapel Kiwanis button with its content of lethal poison and finally the special gun that would roast almost anything in a mushroom of fire.

I widened my grin. I now was prepared for Sandy Miller—and Forty-three.

THE PLANE touched down in a drizzle and rolled to a stop exactly on time. I claimed my single suitcase and turned across the terminal. I walked briskly, alert to all of the movement around me. My contact could come out of that movement. He or she would know me on sight; I probably wouldn't recognize him or her.

I glanced up at the wall clock automatically as I proceeded toward the glass door that would take me out of the terminal. It was eleven minutes after ten o'clock. The glass door opened electronically as I neared it. I went quickly outside.

A cab rolled up in front of me and the driver leaned over the back of the front seat to open the door for me. I got inside and said, "I want the best hotel in town."

"Fare's one sixty-seven, mister," he said without looking around at me.

"Right," I grinned. "One sixty-seven."

Contact had been made.

He laid out the assignment as we rolled along a busy avenue. It seems there was a legitimate industrialist-philanthropist named H. M. Rolfe who resided in Forty-three, who had made one journey to Moscow and two trips to Peking in the last eight years, and who had, because of those sojourns, attracted the attention of the bureau.

"We've had him under surveillance almost five years now," said my driver.

"Is he a nut?"

"No."

"Just well received in Moscow and Peking, huh?"

"Especially Peking."

"Because of his political philosophy?"

"He pours into the Democratic coffers and votes a straight ticket but he also has some ideas about full stomachs producing peaceful nations and how the world's stomachs can be filled."

"Sound, perhaps," I admitted.

"Perhaps," said my driver. "Door openers, at least, to Peking."

"And?"

"Suddenly he needs a professional killer."

"Why?" I asked sharply.

My driver shrugged. "That's what you are suppose to discover."

"I'm the pro, huh?"

"You're the pro."

"How?"

"Rolfe has a friend, a man named Brian Bolivar. Newspaperman here. Columnist. Big. It's one of those incongruous friendships no one can explain but if there is a man Rolfe will confide in, and trust, it's Bolivar—and he has confided. He has told Bolivar he wants to retain a professional killer. He didn't tell Bolivar why he wants this killer, but he thinks Bolivar is enough man-around-town to produce.

"Bolivar is, but Bolivar also smells a helluva big story and is stuffed with just enough patriotism to go to the FBI. They came to us, knowing our interest in Rolfe."

"Why didn't Bolivar go to the local gendarmes?"

"Bolivar is aware of the federal government's interest in Rolfe. That's where he smells the big story. Bolivar thinks Rolfe is not a man to be bothered by petty irritations. Bolivar thinks that if Rolfe wants a killer, there is a very large reason. He thinks it could have Moscow or Peking overtones. We agree with him."

"So Mr. Bolivar has been given a killer?"

"Mr. Bolivar has been given a name. Kevin Kar, who resides in an apartment at thirty-one thirty-one Oakside Avenue. Mr. Bolivar tonight is passing this name and the name King and the address along to Mr. Rolfe. It is expected that Mr. Rolfe, in the next day or two, will be calling on Mr. Kar—or King. That King bit is icing. It looks better if a man kills under a pseudonym."

"Agreed," I said with a sigh.

My driver handed a ring of keys over the back of the seat. I took the ring.

"The keys are numbered," he said. "One sixty-seven lets you into Apartment Eight. Second floor, third door on the right."

We were at 3131 Oakside Avenue.

"For Mr. Rolfe's information, Mr. Kar, you profess to be a writer," my driver said. "The apartment is set up that way."

"And after I discover who Rolfe wants killed and why?"

"You'll be told."

I left the cab with my suitcase and watched the taillights disappear. I knew a touch of disappointment. I couldn't see where Sandy Miller might conceivably have a role in producing a killer for H. M. Rolfe.

The apartment was modest and had the dust-filmed, cluttered look of being used by a bachelor writer who was more interested in what his typewriter produced than in housekeeping. The furniture and carpeting looked worn, there was a corner of well-thumbed reference books and the lampshades did not sit straight.

I looked over the desk and the

portable typewriter. There was the appropriate dust and eraser peeling collection beneath the keys of the typewriter. I turned from the desk and began the search, but I was back at the desk when I found the tape recorder. It was inside the platen of the typewriter.

The call came at ten o'clock in the morning of my second day in Forty-three. I was awakened by the jangle of the extension telephone at my bedside. An alto voice inquired, "Mr. King?"

I sat up in bed, lifted the phone into my lap. I held the receiver tight against my ear.

"My name is H. M. Rolfe, Mr. King," the alto voice continued. "I wish to make an appointment with you for four o'clock this—"

"I'm sorry, sir," I interrupted flatly. "You have the wrong number. My name is Kar."

There was a moment of silence before Rolfe said peremptorily, "Yes, I understand, Mr. King."

"I am a writer," I said. "My only appointments are with my agent."

Rolfe's sigh was audible. "I know what you profess to be, Mr. King, however—" He paused. I heard another drawn breath. "All right," he said. "I want a man to die."

I remained tensely silent.

"Four o'clock, Mr. King?"

I allowed him to sweat for a couple of moments and then I clipped the acquiescence: "Yes."

The click of the receiver at the other end of the line was a soft sound. I put the phone together and frowned down on it. I wondered if it was tapped, too.

At precisely four o'clock that afternoon, the door buzzer sounded in the apartment and I ushered in a small, quick, expensively-dressed man of fifty, who might have been sixty. He didn't waste words or time. He said, "I assume we can dispense with fencing, Mr. King. Or do you prefer to be called Mr. Kar? At any rate, you have admitted me and that has to mean you intend to kill me or to listen to me." He paused, took a wallet from an inside coat pocket and removed several one thousand dollar bills.

"Which is it to be?" he asked.

I lit a cigarette. "You have guts, Mr. Rolfe."

"It is why I am a success. It is how I have accumulated my fortune. You also will find me a thorough man, Mr. King. I protect."

I smoked. Rolfe had a delicate neck. Quite slender. A single karate slash would kill him.

"I have been dictating this afternoon," he said. "I feel that, in the

proper hands, the tape can be quite damaging to you."

"The proper hands being the police?" I asked.

He shrugged.

"Should you not leave here as you entered the tape will go to the police?"

He shrugged again. He seemed to consider me for a moment, then he said, "You were highly recommended, Mr. Kar. I believe the established price is twenty-five thousand."

It was my turn to shrug.

He placed the bills in his hand on the table beside the telephone. "As I told you, I want a man to die. Me." He cocked an eyebrow at me. I said nothing. He went on with a half smile, "Of course, I don't want to die. Not literally. But I do want it to look as if I have been killed."

"And how do you disappear, Mr. Rolfe?"

"I have completed arrangements with a plastic surgeon in another section of the country. That part of it is my business."

"Insurance? You die and your wife collects? Later she joins you at—"

"No," said Rolfe. "I am a rich man, Mr. Kar. I carry my own insurance. In cash."

I waited patiently.

"Treasury agents are about to descend on me, Mr. Kar. Income tax. And—" Rolfe paused. He looked me straight in the eye.

"There is my wife. In a few months I wish to return and kill my wife."

"You?" I cocked an eyebrow.

"Me," said Rolfe firmly. "I want the pleasure of watching her die. Now—how much time will you need to prepare my death?"

"Two weeks, perhaps three. I also will need photographs of you. Head and shoulders, taken at various angles. Pick out a good studio."

"I will select an artist."

After he had departed, I smoked a cigarette, drank a glass of milk and put a symphony record on the player. I sat comfortable in a chair, staring at the stack of thousand dollar bills on the table.

I looked at the portable typewriter, smiled. It was time to leave the apartment, walk down to the corner drug, buy a package of cigarettes, give someone the opportunity to change the platens of the typewriter. I was pushing up from the chair when the door buzzer sounded again.

She was a handsome, preserved woman with thickly painted, burnt orange lips and penciled black eyebrows. She looked forty. She wore an expensive green suit and a sleek upsweep hair style.

"Mr. Kar?" she asked politely. She waited for me to nod and then she said, "I am Mrs. Rolfe. May I come in?"

I put her in the wing chair near the telephone. She crossed good legs and placed a large knit, pear-

shaped purse on her lap. Its color matched the color of her lips.

She looked at the stack of bills near her and smiled.

"Are you going to do it?" she asked.

"What?" I said bluntly.

"Please, Mr. Kar," she said patiently. "Let's not dally. I see you've taken money from him."

"He left the money, Mrs. Rolfe. There's a difference."

"Then you're going to do it," she said confidently. "Or you would not have allowed him to leave it. I think you are that kind of man."

"And exactly what kind of a woman are you, Mrs. Rolfe?"

She thought about it momentarily before she said with a tiny smile, "You might term me an opportunist."

"How much of an opportunist?"

"One hundred thousand dollars worth?"

"Against"—I glanced at the stack of bills on the table—"twenty-five thousand?"

"Perhaps." She looked amused.

"You know your husband."

"Thoroughly."

"You know how he thinks, how he functions."

"I could not live with him if I did not. No woman could."

"You know he plans to disappear."

"I also know he plans to kill me—sometime."

She remained silent for several seconds. She stared at me. She did not move a muscle. Then suddenly she laughed softly, uncrossed and recrossed her legs, spread the opening of the orange purse on its draw strings, took out a cigarette and leathered covered lighter and fired the cigarette.

"Mr. Kar," she said, "I have a proposition, too."

"You want me to kill your husband. You do not want him to survive his—er, accident."

"Oh, quite the opposite."

"Yeah?"

"I want my husband's death—my way."

"And that is?"

"In the Pacific."

I smoked, remained silent.

"The death you plan," Mrs. Rolfe went on. "Will there be a body?"

"Certainly."

She nodded. "Good. There should be. Something I can identify. Later we will dispose of him—totally."

"In the Pacific."

"Yes," she said flatly. "Harry will go to Los Angeles after the accident. He has a cache there, in cash. It's in a safety deposit box in various banks. He has been preparing for this for years."

"How much?"

"Perhaps six million."

I blinked.

"You will follow him. He has arranged for plastic surgery. After he enters the hospital you will telephone me and I will fly out."

"Next?"

"I think Harry is planning to purchase some kind of boat. I have seen literature in his study. I think he may be planning to consolidate his cache aboard ship and then go to South America."

I wondered if it might be some place in China, like Peking, rather than South America but I said, "All right; let's talkk about the hundred grand."

She looked at me head-on.

"For you," she said, "after my husband has been dumped overboard."

"That's how you plan to dispose of him—totally?"

"I won't want a body found."

"What about the crew?"

"He may or may not have a crew. We will have to meet that situation when the time comes."

"Your husband is an experienced sailor?"

"Not really. But he can handle a cruiser. We both can. We were reared on the edge of the sea, in Rhode Island."

"And just how do we get aboard?"

"We might have to stow away."

I finished my cigarette, butted it slowly. "Mrs. Rolfe, assuming we get aboard, assuming there is no crew, assuming we are successful in disposing of your husband, what then happens to me?"

"I put you ashore," she said. "It may be a lonely beach. There may be a slight inconvenience. But you will be ashore—and you will have one hundred thousand dollars in your pocket."

"Aren't you taking a chance?"

"You mean you might pitch me overboard, too?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever operated a large boat on the ocean, Mr. Kar?"

"No."

She smiled. "Are you familiar with the ocean?"

"No."

"Would you expect to bob around until help came along?"

"It could happen."

"And there would be an investigation, Mr. Kar. A thorough investigation, since the boat will be registered to my husband and not to you."

"Okay, so you put me ashore."

"Yes." She nodded, smiled again. Her hand went into the purse. It came out holding a small gun. The muzzle of the gun was pointed at me.

"I put you ashore," she said. "And from the moment I decide to put you ashore, you will be facing —" She stopped, letting it hang.

I lit a fresh cigarette. "You, Mrs. Rolfe, seem to have all of the answers."

"At the moment," she agreed.

She put away the gun, crushed out her cigarette in an ashtray, stood. "You will let me know when you have decided—"

"I've decided," I said.

She smiled and let herself out of the apartment.

I sat then for a long time and wondered who would be next. No one buzzed. I knew I had to be making someone sweat, so I went down to the street and bought a package of cigarettes.

When I returned, I had to use the key to let myself into the apartment, but he was there. His back was to me. He was in workman coveralls. He was on one knee beside the disassembled telephone.

The platen was gone from the portable typewriter. It was on the table beside the telephone and two wires were hooked from the platen to the base of the phone. Voices—mine and H. M. Rolfe's—came from the phone base. The twenty-five thousand dollars still was stacked on the table. It was the only reason I did not kill the kneeling man.

He looked around his shoulder at me and gave me a silly grin. He looked like any beat-up politician in Washington might look—in coveralls. But his name was Holly and he was not a politician. He was my boss.

I said, "Hi, snoopy."

He grunted, turned back to the platen. I remained silent, listening to my conversation with H. M. Rolfe and, later, his wife. When it was finished, Holly unhooked the wires, put the platen in the open tool case at his knee, removed another platen, put it in the typewriter and finally turned on me.

"You go ahead with both of them," he said.

I nodded.

He told me *how* I was to go ahead with H. M. Rolfe.

I nodded again, then he said, "You play *her* by ear."

"Right."

He put the twenty-five thousand dollars in his tool kit and left the apartment.

I watched the door close behind him. After it was closed, I chuckled and lit a fresh cigarette. I felt good. I had passed Holly's test. The platen had been planted to see if I would find it, to see if I would give opportunity to whoever had planted it, then return in time to recover it if it had not been our people.

To Holly it had meant something vital: I had not rusted in my sixteen days out of action in my native Amarillo.

I WAITED the three days I was supposed to wait and then I telephoned H. M. Rolfe at his residence and demanded the photographs he was supposed to deliver. He sounded slightly surprised and

was just a bit apologetic, but he said, "I have them. I just got them from the photographer this afternoon."

"I'll drive out," I said.

"No," he said quickly. "I have to come into the city tonight. I'll bring them."

"We'll meet in the cocktail lounge of the Rasmussen Hotel," I said. "One hour."

We did, he produced the glossy prints, and then I drove out to the funeral home Holly had given me. I got a guy who looked as dead as the people he dealt with and who fumbled all over the large office when I told him I wanted a casket for one-sixty-seven.

"I believe, sir," he mumbled, "you will have to talk to our director, Mr. Dexter."

I talked to Mr. Dexter, who was tall, thin and cooperative.

"Certainly, sir," he said, clipping the words and worrying a thread-thin mustache with a forefinger. "I'm sure we can provide at your convenience. Do you wish to converse with Mr. Pole, too?"

I wished to converse with Mr. Pole. Dexter went with me in the rented heap, directing me into the shank of the city. The basement of the brownstone smelled of garlic and mildew. The room we entered was worse. An odor of grease paint and decay was strong. Both evaporated from a bulbous mound of flesh sprawled in drunken slumber on the bed.

Dexter heated black coffee he found in a charcoaled pot, propped the mound of flesh and forced Bernard Pole to drink the coffee.

In his day, Pole had been a makeup artist, perhaps the legitimate theater's best. That had been before the starlet. The starlet had screamed statutory rape, and now Pole was nothing, a mere shell of what he had once been. But the shell was enough for us—sober. The shell still had no peer when sober. And for one hundred dollars, cash, the shell would sober.

Bernard Pole slowly inched his legs from the bed and sat up. He shuddered. His sunken eyes remained closed.

His color was bad. His face looked damp and slippery. The beard stubble was a mixture of gray and black. He stood carefully and bobbed. His small eyes popped open.

Pole took two steps, stopped, shuddered again, then continued to the open commode in the corner where he went down on his knees and was ill. We waited. Finally Pole gave a last gasping heave and then he turned. His eyes were in focus now, his breathing more regular.

I produced the photographs of H. M. Rolfe and took them to the fat man, who studied them for a long time before looking up.

"Good lines," he said. "When?"

"Perhaps tomorrow night."

Pole nodded and Dexter pro-

duced a second envelope. Inside was one hundred dollars in worn twenty dollar bills.

The following morning H. M. Rolfe expressed mild surprise at my swiftness. "Tonight, it is, Mr. Kar," he said. "One does not prepare to die by accident. Things must be left hanging or one's death is not accidential."

"You are a fishing enthusiast, Mr. Rolfe."

"Am I?"

"Your preference is stream fishing. You have a cabin."

"You are thorough, Mr. Kar."

"It will not be unusual if you debark suddenly on a Thursday night for a weekend fishing excursion in the hill country."

"You are thorough, Mr. Kar."

"This is a Thursday. I will meet you at Halfway Point. I will be in the bar at midnight. Do not recognize me. Merely appear so I will know you have arrived. If you do not see me, wait. Is your car equipped with seat belts?"

"Yes."

"Fine. Come prepared to travel."

"Will I be returning to the city?"

"Briefly."

"I have been planning to fly to the coast, Mr. Kar. I will need to make a reservation."

"You will not be flying."

Silence.

"Mr. Rolfe, there is vast anonymity in highway travel in an inconspicuous automobile." I let it hang purposely.

Rolfe seemed to debate it, then he said, "All right, Mr. Kar. Perhaps you are correct, but if I am to travel by auto I will of course need also—"

"A car will be waiting for you when we return to the city. One more thing."

"Yes?"

"Dress properly. A man doesn't go fishing in a business suit."

"You think of everything, don't you, Mr. Kar?"

"I try to."

I was efficiently busy the remainder of that Thursday. I got the used car and drove it to an all-night parking lot in another corner of the city. Then I returned to the apartment and telephoned the Rolfe residence. A maid summond Mrs. Rolfe.

"Tonight," I said.

"Oh?" said Mrs. Rolfe cautiously.

"It will probably be a week before I phone you."

"All right."

"I've decided you don't have to bring the gun."

The line was silent for a few moments before she said, "I'll decide that, Mr. Kar."

That evening I put the valise containing the fire bomb which had been delivered to me on the floor in the back seat of the sedan. Then I drove to the brownstone. I found Bernard Pole totally sober and flexing his talented fingers as though he were an explosive expert

preparing to defuse a delicate booby trap.

The fat man was in a holiday frame of mind. "In by seven, out by eleven. That's our motto around this joint, Kar."

I did not appreciate the levity. "It will be between eight-thirty and nine o'clock when we arrive and I will need him before eleven."

Pole sobered. "You'll have him."

I left him and drove to the funeral home, where Dexter was waiting for me.

"Same general lines of body as Mr. Rolfe," he said. "Same general facial structure. Not perfect, perhaps, but certainly a body no one will miss. A city case, you understand. Found dead in a street by the police, and—"

"Just give him to me," I said.

We took the corpse from the closed casket and put it in the trunk of my heap. I thanked Dexter and drove back to the brownstone. Pole was waiting and anxious to get to work.

He worked swiftly and expertly, using the photographs of H. M. Rolfe I had provided as guides. When he had finished, I was pleased. The corpse was an excellent facsimile of the rich man. We carried it out the back door of the brownstone and folded it into the trunk of the sedan.

It was five minutes before midnight when I walked into Halfway Point in the hill country. Rolfe, in the casual clothing of an outdoors man, was waiting for me.

I drank a beer and left the club. Rolfe trailed me. I drove from the parking lot and five miles up the steep, winding road before turning onto a cutout. Rolfe braked behind me.

"Leave your headlights on," I told him. "And you owe me twenty-seven hundred dollars for the car you will be using."

He paid from a fat wallet.

"All right," I said, looking up and down the road, "go around to the other side of the car and strip. Everything."

"Wh-at?" stammered Rolfe.

"Move, man! We're on borrowed time!"

He scrambled and I opened the trunk of the sedan. This was the weak point. If someone came along the road now and stopped, I was in trouble. I worked swiftly. I removed the dead facsimile of H. M. Rolfe from the trunk and pulled him around to Rolfe. Rolfe, now shirtless, gasped.

"Hurry!" I rasped, stretching the dead man out on the edge of the dropoff. "And if someone comes along and stops, kick him over the edge. Got it?"

Rolfe nodded. He looked a little sick.

I returned to the sedan and jacked up a back wheel. Scattering the tire tools, I checked the road again. No headlights. I returned to the dead man, stripped

him, and pushed the clothing onto the naked Rolfe. Then I dressed the dead man in Rolfe's clothing, while Rolfe gingerly clothed himself again.

"Your ring," I said.

Rolfe recoiled. I caught his hand and wrenched the ring from his finger. I put it on the dead man, then I took the body around Rolfe's car and used the seat belt to fasten him behind the steering wheel.

I jacked down the sedan, threw the tools into the trunk, and put Rolfe in the front seat. Removing the valise, I set the time clock on the fire bomb to three minutes, placed the bomb under the front seat of Rolfe's car, then stood in the open door, stretched a foot inside, found the accelerator, put the car into gear and drove it weavingly out of the cutout.

Several yards up the road, I turned the car toward the dropoff, leaped and slammed the door. The car disappeared over the edge of the road and I was already racing back to the cutout. I spilled behind the steering wheel of the sedan and swung it in a wide U turn out of the cutout. We were moving down the road when I heard the muffled explosion behind us.

I caught a glimpse of the fire flash in the outside rear view mirror.

"You're dead, Mr. Rolfe," I said grimly.

He slowly regained his composure as we returned to the city. By the time I had put him inside the used car the rich man in the poor man's clothing was his normal self.

"You are a very efficient man, Mr. Kar," he said crisply through the open window. "I almost dislike losing your acquaintance."

"Yeah," I said.

"Au revoir," he said jauntily.

I lifted a hand and watched him drive off to his six million. I wondered how he planned to spend it.

Friday morning I boarded the jet and that afternoon checked into a Los Angeles motel. I phoned room service immediately and asked for four bottles of beer.

The guy who brought the bottles was short and bald. He produced a tab for a dollar and sixty-seven cents. I laid it out on his tray. He said, "There's a blue convertible outside."

"I saw it."

He produced keys to the convertible. "Watch it. It's a charged job."

I nodded. I knew what he meant.

I killed the weekend. I used the motel pool and other facilities, but I didn't leave the premises. I didn't see the bald man again, either. It rained Monday, all day and all night. I thought Tuesday would never arrive, but it did. And with it came bright sunshine, but no contact.

Had something gone wrong? Had Rolfe managed to elude the

agents who were to trail him across the country? According to Holly's plan, a new man was to pick him up every four hundred miles. Had one of them been hoodwinked? At the latest, Rolfe should have arrived in Los Angeles by Monday. I should have heard about his arrival Monday night. I hadn't. And now it was Tuesday.

The temptation to call Washington was strong but I managed to curb it through Tuesday and Wednesday. Thursday morning, I vowed to wait out the day before committing the cardinal sin and phoning Holly.

I was stretched out in a deck chair at poolside late Thursday afternoon when a young, tanned, deep chested red-haired girl in a white bathing suit and large sunglasses adjusted the chair to my right and got comfortable in it. She had brought a can of beer with her.

She drank from the can without looking at me, and then she said, "One dollar and sixty-seven cents for your thoughts, Mr. Kar."

"Where," I managed without jerking upright, "in hell have you people been?"

The girl laughed gently. "Busy."

I looked directly at her then. She wasn't Sandy Miller, but she could have been. Holly could have sent Sandy, but he hadn't. I cursed him silently before I said, "And?"

The girl laughed again, drank beer. "My! Caustic. Haven't you enjoyed your stay here?"

I said nothing.

She lit a cigarette, blew out smoke. "Incidently, Sandy sends her love."

That did make me sit up in the chair. "Sandy is in L.A.?"

Now it was the girl's turn to say nothing. She smiled, drew smoke, allowed the smoke to trail from her nose as she stretched back in the chair. She cocked a rich-brown knee, waggled it, smoked again, then said to the sun: "Rolfe arrived Monday."

She named a popular downtown hotel. "He checked in there, then went to a bank. On Tuesday, he went to a second bank. Yesterday he visited a third. He carried a briefcase to and from each. Late yesterday afternoon he took a cab to the office of a man who is reputed to be among the best of Hollywood's plastic surgeons. This morning he entered a hospital under the name H. M. Folsom."

She gave me the name of the hospital and I said, "Thanks," and left my chair.

"Mr. Kar?"

She was smiling when I looked back on her. The sunglasses gleamed at me, the knee continued to waggle.

"I think," Mr. Kar," she said softly, "I know what Sandy means when she says you are different. It's your chest. So massive."

"Ditto, chum."

She laughed low. I could really like that girl.

ROLFE remained in the hospital until the plastic surgery was successfully completed, and he had recovered. When he was discharged, I almost missed him. He had a new face when he came out of the hospital, but the quick, bird-like steps were the giveaway. He got into a cab and went straight to the downtown hotel. I followed in the blue convertible. Was this the time to hit him, as Holly had instructed me to do? I was convinced he now had his cache in the hotel. Was this the time to knock on his door and present myself as a blackmailer?

While I debated, Rolfe came out of the hotel again and claimed another cab. I trailed him to a dock area boat firm, where he spent most of the afternoon purchasing a large cruiser. Two tanned young men in dungarees and white sea captain hats, worn jauntily, took Rolfe out on the cruiser.

I knew a tremendous urge to run along the pier and leap aboard until rationalization told me that this was a trial run.

I waited in the topdown convertible. I chain-smoked and took in the row of piers. There were fishermen, men and women, some sunbathers. A dark brown Latin-American girl in bright yellow shorts and blouse vacated a small foreign-made car in the parking lot and walked out to the end of a pier fifty yards to my right.

She stirred something inside me. She was constructed along the same general lines of Sandy Miller and had the same good legs.

I thought about Sandy. Was she here in L.A.? The deep-chested redhead hadn't said. I grunted, lit another cigarette, watched the Latin-American girl sit down on the end of the pier. Then I caught the cruiser in the corner of my eye.

The cruiser was coming in fast, nose up out of the water, white foam peeling away from it. It slowed, curved, coasted in to the pier where the girl in the yellow shorts sat.

She didn't seem to pay any particular attention as the cruiser was docked and tied. Rolfe and the two men in dungarees walked from the pier to the boathouse. The two men were talking; Rolfe was smiling. Thirty minutes later, a cab entered the parking lot and Rolfe left the boathouse to enter the cab.

I trailed him to the downtown hotel again, watched him check out and then return to the cruiser. The Latin-American girl still sat on the end of the pier. She was talking with one of the two men from the boathouse now, but the man left her as Rolfe got out of the cab.

He helped Rolfe carry the three briefcases and two suitcases aboard the cruiser. Ten minutes later, the man walked away from the cruiser. One pocket of his dungarees bulged and he was grinning. I figured he was going to grin all the way to the bank.

It was time to move in.

The Latin-American girl was leaving the pier. I waited until she folded into the foreign car and drove away. Then I left the convertible, walked the pier and went aboard the cruiser.

The deck was empty. I scowled briefly against the sun before turning to an entry that had to lead down into the quarters below deck. The door of the entry opened and H. M. Rolfe expressed immobile shock when he recognized me.

Then he recoiled. His mouth worked, but no words came out. I followed him down steep, narrow steps and into a large cabin. There was a closed door to my left. I listened for sound. Nothing. Rolfe was alone. I saw the three briefcases open on a small table behind him. Packages of money gleamed at me. I grinned.

"You!" he stammered. "My God, what do you want?"

I laughed and moved in on him carefully, watching his eyes. This had to be quick. It was suppose to give us an idea about how badly H. M. Rolfe wanted to leave the country. I said, "How much is it worth to you, Mr. Rolfe, to remain dead?"

"Mr. Kar?" The soft voice came from my left and behind me.

I didn't jerk, but I damned my stupidity. I saw the ashtray then. There were two cigarette butts in the tray. One was orange tipped. I knew when she had come aboard: while I had tailed Rolfe to the hotel and had watched him check out.

Rolfe's new face abruptly relaxed. There was a crooked grin. Eyes narrowed down and filled with triumph.

"I believe you have met my wife," he said smugly.

I turned slowly, my thoughts churning. The closed door was now open. Mrs. Rolfe stood in the opening. She wore dark slacks and a white blouse. She looked neat, unruffled and stone-faced. She held the gun in her hand.

"I am an expert shot, Mr. Kar," she said.

I believed her.

Her husband chuckled. "Did you think, Mr. Kar, we could just go away and leave you to expose or blackmail us when ever you felt like it?"

I held his eyes, attempted to see into them. Was it really this simple? Had these two simply planned to drop out of sight, no more? Was

there no Moscow or Peking involved?

"Yes, Mr. Kar," Rolfe said as if he had read my mind. "It was planned, every step. We anticipated the lure of one hundred thousand dollars would bring you here. Don't you think we have been clever?"

"Except for one thing," I said.

Rolfe cocked his head. His eyes flashed to his wife, came back. There as the briefest shadow of consternation in them.

"A tape," I pressed.

"A tape?" Rolfe arched a brow.

"I learned from you," I said. "You came to me with a tape." I lifted my shoulders in a shrug. "I came here with a tape—only I didn't bring the tape with me. I left it with a friend. And I guess you know what—"

"I don't believe you," he interrupted.

I shrugged again. This time the shrug felt good.

"Okay, so take a chance," I said. "Kill me. Leave the country. Did you happen to notice the Latin-American girl sitting on the end of the pier when you came aboard a few moments ago?"

The expression on his face told me he remembered her.

"My friend," I said. "She has the tape. And if I do not leave here as—"

"Harry," his wife interrupted, "he's bluffing. Search him. See if he is armed."

I played it as dumb as I knew how. I gaped on her.

"What about our deal?" I squawked. "You said you'd give me a hundred grand—" I let it trail off purposely, whipped back to her husband. "She's planning to kill you, Mr. Rolfe!" I yelped, waving my arms wildly. "She's going to get you out to sea, shoot you and pitch out overboard!"

Rolfe looked amused.

"And miss out on the spending of twelve million dollars?" He shook his head. "No, I don't think she wants to miss that. It's why my six million is worth in Peking, you know. Twelve million. That's the rate of exchange I've contracted. Two for one. Peking has a great need for the American dollar."

"Let's get on with this, Harry," his wife said. "Search him and tie him up. We'll put him overboard tomorrow, as we planned."

He came in close. His hands patted my chest. He found the conventional gun and the rig. He smiled, reached inside my coat, removed the gun, held it aloft in triumph. For an instant his eyes were off me, and it was in that instant I caught his shirt front and flipped him toward his wife.

The sound of the shot from her gun reverberated against my eardrums as I went down to the floor and rolled.

I saw Rolfe go up on his toes, then spill sideways and fall. Blood gushed from his chest.

I triggered the tear gas from my ring, but Mrs. Rolfe was too far away for it to be effective. She was sprawled against a cabin wall now, pushed there by the momentum of her husband being propelled against her, but she was coming up, regaining her balance.

She fired a wild shot. The slug banged against the floor near my head. I rolled, yanked the special gun from the holster at my spine, triggered it. Mrs. Rolfe screamed when the flame struck her.

I rolled to Rolfe, grabbed my gun, but I didn't need it. His wife was on the floor, her clothing already burned away. And now the flames were licking at the cabin wall. In a few seconds the cabin would be an inferno.

I leaped to my feet, grabbed up the three briefcases of money and bolted. On deck, I burst out of the smoke beginning to pour from the cabin entry and hung for a moment against the railing, dragging in huge gulps of air. Then I heard the shout.

A guy was racing down the pier toward the cruiser. A cluster of people trailed him.

I vaulted the railing and landed on the pier. I went down on my haunches. The guy loomed over me.

"On board!" I shouted. "There are two people on board! Help them!"

The guy left me and the others followed him up onto the deck of the cruiser. Only a little old lady offered to help me. I waved her off, got to my feet. "I'm—I'm all right," I choked for her benefit. "I just—just need air."

I staggered up the pier against the wash of traffic toward shore and the blue convertible. I didn't hear the little old lady padding along behind me and I risked a glance. She stood staring after me.

On shore, a man grabbed my arm, the arm holding the brief cases. "You okay, buddy?"

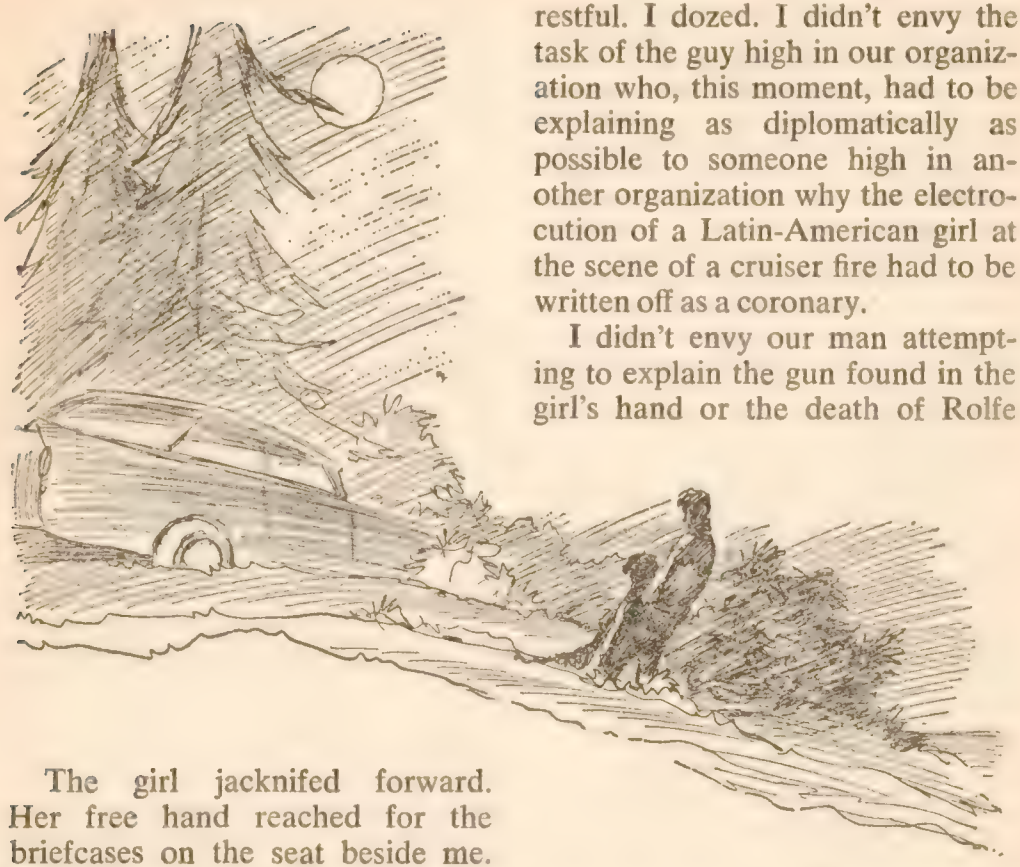
I turned from him. "They need the help out there," I said, pointing dramatically to the cruiser.

Flames had broken through the deck now, sending the crowd back to the pier. I heard the wail of sirens in the distance.

I went to the convertible, dropped inside, stuck the key in the ignition. The motor purred. And then the Latin-American girl in the yellow shorts and yellow blouse appeared out of nowhere outside the passenger side of the convertible. Her face was set. She held a gun in her hand.

"The briefcases," she demanded. "Quickly!"

It required a flash of thought. So Peking had been waiting for Rolfe to collect his cache, too. There was going to be an exchange, okay, only not at the two for one rate. The money merely had been going to exchange hands. From Rolfe's to Peking's. At gunpoint.



THE DRONE of the plane was restful. I dozed. I didn't envy the task of the guy high in our organization who, this moment, had to be explaining as diplomatically as possible to someone high in another organization why the electrocution of a Latin-American girl at the scene of a cruiser fire had to be written off as a coronary.

I didn't envy our man attempting to explain the gun found in the girl's hand or the death of Rolfe who had died by gunshot aboard the fire-ravaged cruiser. The guy picked to return the six million dollars to Rolfe's safety deposit boxes had it easy. I had it easy. I was going home to Amarillo.

When I left the plane, I drew in the tepid, dry night air gratefully. Compared to the heavy, clammy air of Los Angeles, it was nectar. I smiled to myself as I walked to the terminal. There was the report to be made and then perhaps I might have another sixteen days of relaxation.

The girl jacknifed forward. Her free hand reached for the briefcases on the seat beside me. The lower half of her body was pressed against the side of the car. I jammed a thumb against the special button on the dash and—as the agent who had brought the beer to me in the motel had said—the car was charged. Electrically charged. The girl stiffened, shuddered. Her eyes popped. And then she was dead.

I took my thumb from the button and banged a hand against her shoulder. She flopped back and disappeared below the side of the convertible.

I drove like hell out of there.

I claimed my suitcase and caught the flash of legs in the corner of my eye, then I grinned, watching the undulation of the sleek hips of the tall girl who was walking away from me toward the phone booths.

I followed the undulation, allowed the girl to deposit her dime and dial before I tapped fingernails on the glass. Sandy Miller said something I couldn't hear—and it probably was just as well—when she saw me.

"What," I said as she left the phone booth, "in hell are you doing here?"

"That was my seventh dime, Mr. Kar. I've been here since five o'clock this afternoon. I'm catching a flight out of here late tonight. In the meantime, I had thought a girl might waggle a drink."

"Where are you going?"

She shook her head, looked around. "I still have three hours. Time enough for a drink?"

We rode a cab to my duplex. She didn't ask where I had been or what I had been doing. Nor did I again ask her destination or why she was in Amarillo. I was contented with the prospect of three hours. But inside the duplex she volunteered: "I'm on my way to Mexico City. I had to be there tomorrow night."

Tomorrow night, eh?

I chuckled, winked at Honeybelle, who was facing the right direction, made the drinks, then went into the bedroom, unscrewed the knob from the dresser drawer and filed my report with the mirror.

When I returned to the front room, Sandy was somber. Sitting there, deep in a wing chair, her long nyloned legs high, crossed and gleaming in the lamplight, she asked one question: "What happens to the six million?"

I shrugged. "It belonged to Rolfe. As far as we know, it's legitimate money. So it goes back into the banks—and an estate, I imagine. The only thing Washington frowned on was where and how he was going to exchange it. And if it had gotten right down to cases, if his wife had not attempted to kill me, he could have merely put me off his boat and shipped out for Peking or anywhere else in the world. We couldn't stop the exchange, really. After all, it was his money."

"Yes," Sandy said thoughtfully. She sat silent for a few seconds, then she grinned and lifted her empty glass.

"I find," she said, "that I have time for two drinks."

"You have to be in Mexico City tomorrow night, huh?" I said from the kitchen.

"Yes."

"So you could stay over, huh? I mean, you could catch a flight out of here tomorrow?"

"Get that lecherous grin off your face, Mr. Kar," she said as I re-

turned to the front room and handed her the glass. She held the top of her skirt against her knee with her free hand. She wiggled. "I'm taking tonight's flight. And, incidently, this is a damned uncomfortable chair—for a girl. It's too deep. It forces a girl to—"

"Specially designed," I grinned. "By me."

"I suspected."

On the sofa opposite her, I casually touched the concealed button in the arm. And then I chuckled as Sandy Miller stiffened slightly.

Her eyes widened. She uncrossed those excellent legs, started to leave the chair.

I saw her eyes roll back up into her head and I lurched forward to capture her drink. No sense in spilling good booze.

Sandy folded back into the chair, sound asleep.

I grinned, took the two drinks into the bedroom, returned, picked up the sleeping Sandy Miller, winked at the tiny needle that protruded from the back of the wing chair.

She would not be asleep long. And she would be angry when she awakened, but later we would have our drinks and I might even build thirds.

Tomorrow she could take her plane to Mexico City.

NEXT MONTH'S EXCITING FEATURE:

PLAY NOW—KILL LATER

She was the woman they loved to kill—and she lived up to her billing! Now they asked me to take a hand in picking her killer—or becoming an exceedingly cold corpse . . .

by CARTER BROWN

We welcome in this issue Carter Brown, famous on three continents for his hard-hitting crime stories. This exciting novel is one of his best!

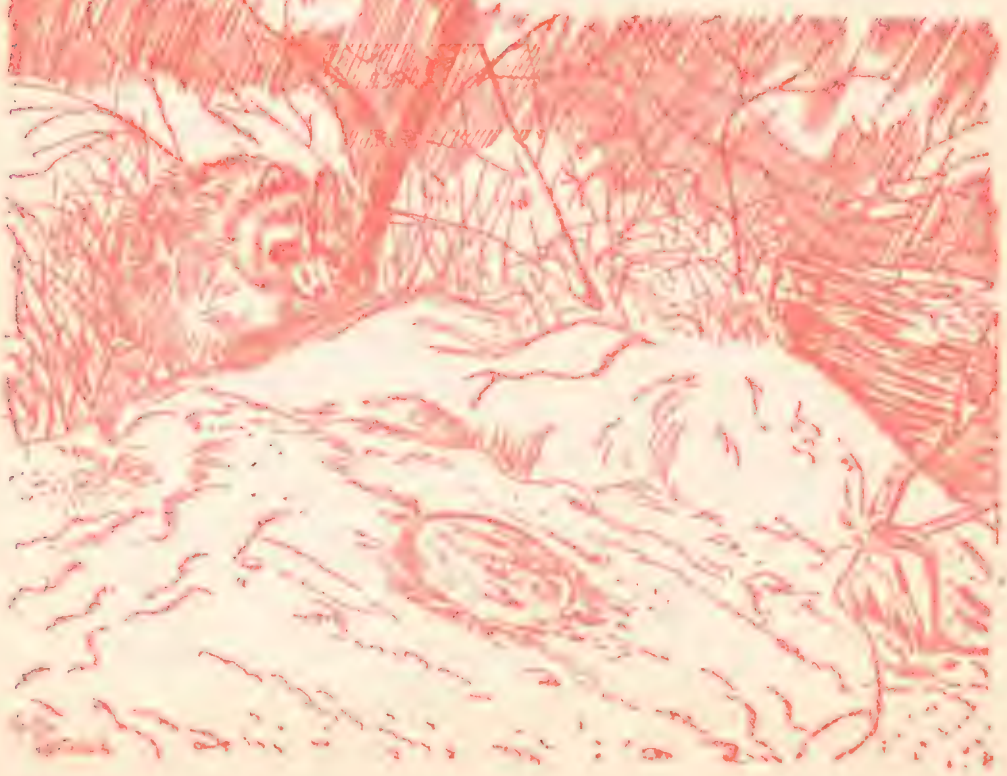
THE PRINT

by ARTHUR PORGES

When you play with the devil's dice—Death is the only winner.

●

HE DIDN'T look like a murderer. He was, as a matter of fact, a weedy youth of twenty-two, with large eyes of watery vagueness and a chin which had modestly with-



drawn from the rest of his thin face.

It should be emphasized that Mark Dawson was not brutal, nor greedy, nor callous. If he was determined to murder, it was not for himself, but for the world—particularly the world of literature—for he hoped and believed he was destined to write the Great American Novel.

It had now been exactly three years since he had put a sheet of paper in his old portable, and had typed, with a feeling of proud dedication: 'THE NAKED EGG, A Novel by Mark Dawson.' Actually, his name was Leroy Gutmacher, but any novelist worthy of the title deserves better than that, and Leroy had no particular loyalty to his family. They had never understood nor encouraged him; they saw him always as a dentist, while he saw himself as taking up a whole issue of "*The New Yorker*" or a long feature article in "*Life.*"

"They have no imagination," he told himself, looking over his rejection slips. "But some day—"

Unfortunately, even he began to realize, after a time, that for him, "some day" would never come.

Yet, curiously, the printed word was to have a big part in his life.

Of all conceivable reading matter, surely none could be less inflammable than a state highway sign. Politically it is at the dead center of neutrality, neither advocating nor condemning any party, major or minor.

Nor is the sign ever pornographic; the most dedicated Freudian symbol-sniffer can find nothing phallic in the stodgy square shape at the side of the road; and what is written on it will never appear on anybody's forbidden list of indecent reading.

These reflections are offered, not as my own, but as some of the ones passing—not necessarily in order—through the mind of Mark Dawson, who was planning the murder of his landlady, and found it difficult to keep his thoughts from straying. Still, it was just such a highway sign, apparently the most innocuous of symbols that led to a killing.

It had started a short time before.

While hitchhiking along Highway 1, that magnificent route still miraculously free of empty beer cans, he had been given a lift by a frail old lady in an ancient jeep. By the time they had covered the twelve miles to her house and five acres between Carmel and Big Sur, Dawson knew he had a better spot than a shack in the redwoods awaiting him if he cared to shoot for it.

For Mrs. Bartlett lived alone, and was not happy about it. Since the death of her husband, three years earlier, she had declined in health and vigor, and was afraid to stay by herself.

"I ain't so young any more," she told Mark, finding him a sympa-

thetic listener. "Sixty-three next March."

To him, there was precious little difference between sixty-three and a hundred and sixty-three. At twenty-two, forty is the age of senility; a person ought to be put away by then; useless to himself and society.

So Mark Dawson became a roomer, staying in Mrs. Bartlett's house on a bluff overlooking the most beautiful coast in the country. It was a spot to inspire any writer, he felt, and his for a pittance.

She was good to him, and he liked her; in contrast to his own parents, she looked on his clacking typewriter with awe, and when he read her bits of 'The Naked Egg,' which sounded like James Joyce being paraphrased by Brendan Behan after a night on the town, she listened open-mouthed, understanding none of it, but dazed by the many-syllabled words he spouted in his nasal monotone.

But Mrs. Bartlett was old, and he was twenty-two. It was all well enough, having her as an auditor, but what he really needed was a young crowd to approve his work-in-progress. And that wasn't very feasible without some capital; the dental school money, intended for a one-semester start, had gone quickly; and he owed his indulgent landlady for three months' rent.

She never mentioned it, and probably never would, but that didn't solve his problem of a stake. Even Mrs. Bartlett had her quirks; she objected to his taking the old jeep to town, and that meant he was trapped in the house. By now he was sick of the ocean; the wind howled too much; it seemed to rain every hour on the hour; and the sea-lions on the Ventura Rocks a few hundred yards from his bedroom window barked all night. Maybe California wasn't such a good idea after all; a writer needed a more bland, tropical climate. Florida was the place. But not for a pauper; those Southern cops were murder if you didn't have some dough.

It was at this time, when his restlessness had reached a climax, that Dawson learned about the old lady's nest-egg. There were ten thousand dollars—her late husband's insurance money—in the house.

One afternoon, when he was supposed to be up the steep private road getting the mail, Mark had turned back for a jacket, and coming quietly to the door, had spotted Mrs. Bartlett inspecting her cache of money, which she kept, he noted with a quickened pulse, in an old flower-pot full of moribund succulents. It was carefully wrapped in plastic bags against dirt and moisture—much better preserved, he felt, than its owner.

Later in the week, when she had taken the jeep to town, he pleaded the pressure of work, although the novel was far behind schedule and likely to stay so until Mark moved

on to more inspiring scenes, and didn't go along. The moment she was safely away, he exhumed the money and counted it.

Ten thousand dollars: a hundred lovely bills, new and crisp from the bank, released with great reluctance by the manager, whose arguments had not availed. There are still people, elderly, for the most part, who after 1929 prefer cash to little books full of figures.

Mark Dawson shuffled the bills lovingly; he hated to put them back, and did so only for the time being. With ten thousand dollars he could get in two years of worry-free writing, and that should do it. What good was the money to an old lady with one foot in the grave?

She had claimed her parents had lived to be both over ninety, and that consequently her own chances were good; but anybody knew that wasn't living. By fifty your blood was cold; you were a campground for bacteria; a vegetable. And even if she had thirty more years to go—he had to admit the old gal wasn't exactly senile—it was a question of relative values—her remaining years against the Great Novel.

It wasn't as if he killed her for sordid, selfish reasons. What if that Russian—was it Tolstoy or Dusty-something?—had needed money to finish that book everybody said was the greatest—"War and Peace"? Wouldn't the world have been cheated more by losing the novel than by the author's knocking off some old gal with a sockful of rubles hidden away?

But he also knew that taking the money and running would be quite stupid. Mrs. Bartlett would squawk to high heaven, and he'd be nabbed in a hurry.

The key point was that nobody knew about her money. The banker had died last year, and the old lady had no close friends in the area. If anything happened to her—anything but murder—nobody would remember the insurance money. And if anybody did, no one could say it wasn't still hidden, as she had promised the banker it would be—"where only I know about it."

Off in Florida, so many miles away, he'd be very discreet about spending any of it for a while. Then he'd claim a few modest sales of stories—under a pen-name, of course. But nobody would push the matter that far; an old lady dies a natural death; her roomer leaves; did she have money buried? Who can say for sure? Hell, they didn't even know his right name.

All of which finally brings us to the highway sign. It read WATCH FOR ROCKS, and wise motorists did just that, because here, on Cabrillo Highway, Route 1, the road winds up and squirms for sixty-three miles, and in season a driver may come around a hairpin turn to find his car nudging a boulder the size of a piano which has just rolled

down a steep hill after minding its own business for centuries.

If he's careful, and going slowly as suggested by the warning sign, he'll be able to stop, watch the opposite lane, and go around. If he's reckless and unlucky, he'll mash his car and himself against the thing, or worse, instinctively pull around it and meet an oncoming car in the other lane. And the ocean, very full of jagged rocks, is five hundred feet straight down.

Mark Dawson saw the sign, and a murder plan took shape in his brain. Suppose, he told himself, Mrs. Bartlett and I were standing here? Let's say the jeep conked out; it's old enough for Social Security. We're standing here, discussing the matter, when a big rock, loosened by the rain, comes rolling down and mashes the poor old lady.

An unusual accident, but not impossible. Sometimes those slides they warn people against engulf a car completely. So why not somebody clobbered by a rock now and then? They can't always miss.

After that, it was just a matter of selection. He scrambled up the hill searching for a boulder of the right size—one that looked ready to roll down at a push. There were many such along the highway; but some were too hard to get at, and others seemed likely to vault over the road.

But finally he spotted a boulder that was made to order for his purpose. It was ideally located, more than massive enough to kill a frail old lady, but not too heavy for a weedy boy to lift. At first he was about to lift and carry it down to the highway; but he caught the error in time. There must be clear evidence of a natural rolling tumble down the slope, or he'd really be in the hot soup.

So Mark tipped the thing, standing on harder ground and vegetation himself, to avoid leaving footprints, and let it skid and bounce down the hill. For a moment he thought it would end up in the ocean; but some weeds across the highway held it.

He scrambled down, then, carred it back across, and hid it on the land side of the road. Now everything was set. Tomorrow he'd get Mrs. Bartlett out here; pretend the jeep was misbehaving. When she got out with him to consider the matter, he'd bash her with the rock. Then he'd either "fix" the car, or flag somebody down. Better the last, to make sure no idiot moved the body and confused the clear evidence of an accident.

A pity she had to die. Unlike so many others, she had never laughed at him; and sixty-three or not, was obviously alert to good writing; she always listened approvingly to what he wrote. Of course, he skipped the four-letter words.

"Florida, here I come!" he told himself delightedly.

No more sitting in a big, empty house with an old lady. He'd have a nice apartment, and plenty of girl-friends; man, he needed that last; he'd been cooped up like some damned monk forever, it seemed. Well, tomorrow was F-day—Freedom Day for Mark Dawson, Writer.

* * *

"I DON'T like Mark Dawson," Jane Stewart said, dumping her work on Chris Morgan's desk.

Her employer—together they made up the whole writing staff of the Carmel 'Clarion,"—gave her a wry smile.

"If we had to like all the people who are news," he said mildly, "there'd be damned little to print." He picked up a glossy photo. "Doesn't look too bad a type; just needs to mature a while, like wine."

"He has the weirdest eyes," she said. "Like splashes of rusty water. And he persists in gargling quarts of his latest novel at people, meaning me. It sounds like a bad imitation of Thomas Wolfe—and that's over-rating it."

"All a matter of youth," Chris said. "You did a good job on the pictures. What's this one?"

"You always say: Take everything in sight; one never knows. That, my friend, is the very spot—the damp depression, where stood the rock that killed the old lady that got out of the jeep—"

"Never mind; I get the point." He studied the large print absently. "So you don't warm up to our young writer."

"In the words of somebody-or-other, he will repay careful avoidance," she said. "But we're not to be favored with his presence on this coast. He's going to Florida as soon as the accident is cleared up. There he will finish his Great American Novel."

She turned to go. Then she saw his face change, hardening suldenly.

"This picture," he muttered. "You took it yesterday—the afternoon of the accident?"

"That's right. She was killed in the morning."

"Tell me again what's supposed to have happened."

"The car had trouble; they got out, standing sideways to the hill. Before he knew what was going on, this rock bounded down the slope and hit Mrs. Bartlett on the side of the head. And that's Thirty."

He put a well-manicured finger on the glossy print.

"Know what that is?"

She looked at it.

"All I see are round marks—oh, it's a footprint of some kind."

"Exactly. And if it's the one I think, I better get to Captain Vance, fast."

"Hey, tell me first," she protested.

"Later," he said, striding to the door.

The Highway Patrol picked up Mark Dawson just as he was about to hitch his third ride near San Simeon. They found only two hundred dollars on him, since he had wisely mailed the rest to himself General Delivery at a small town in Florida which he was not destined to reach. In fact, his trial and conviction were quick and uncomplicated, since there was no defense worth bothering with.

The prosecutor projected an enlargement of Jane Stewart's work on a screen; the jury were all people who lived along the coast; to them the footprint on the damp soil told an unequivocal story. But the D.A. hammered home the point, anyhow.

"You've all seen that kind of print before," he said. "It was made by a raccoon—a big one, old and wise. Looking for bugs where the rock had been moved away. Now, I ask you, ladies and gentlemen of the jury: in all your years here on the coast, how often has any of you ever seen a coon, old or young, on a hill, in the open, by *day?*

"We all know raccoons are night animals. If that is so, and we all know it is, when did that print get under the rock? Not by day, surely. And that means, to anybody who can put two and two together, that the rock rolled down the day before —not the day of the so-called accident. And the night before the so-called accident is when that raccoon made his mark.

"And so it adds up to murder. Mark Dawson had that rock down by the road the day before it was supposed to have fallen there. It never fell on Mrs. Bartlett. He struck her with it like the cold-blooded, ruthless killer he is—" And so on, in the tradition of all D.A.'s.

Mark Dawson never finished his great novel; the forty-odd pages ended up in the death cell with him.

They stayed, but he left.

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Mr. Wong Points a Finger

by DAN ROSS

Why did Walter Brandon die? One alone of three deadly foes knew the answer . . .

•

ART DEALER Mei Wong seldom left his studio in Bombay's Empire Hotel during business hours. But the phone call he'd just received from his friend, Inspector

Bannerjee of the great Indian city's homicide division, had left him little choice.

The inspector's voice had been tense as he said: "I'm at the home of Walter Brandon, the art collector. One of his antique knives is imbedded to the hilt in his back. I think you may be able to help. Can you come over right away?"

"I will leave at once," Mei Wong had promised.

The news of the wealthy American collector's murder came to him as a shock. Only the day before he'd completed the sale of a jewelled blossoming prunus tree of the Yung Cheng period to Brandon. He'd liked the florid-faced, graying millionaire, although he knew there were many who had reason to hate him. These included his stepson, Judson Gary, who only remained in his household and as an employee of the firm because his mother had insisted.

The young man was always quarreling with Brandon. And there was his ex-partner, William Hale, who'd told everyone in Bombay that Brandon had swindled him when he sold out his share of their vast importing business.

Mei Wong's broad face was grave as he stepped out into the blinding sunshine of the street and signaled to a nearby rickshaw boy. He gave the boy the address of Brandon's home and deposited his massive body into the ancient vehicle, which was dried brittle from the merciless sun. The boy picked up the long shafts and leaning his sparse weight against them, plopped off in the direction of the fashionable dwelling area in which Brandon had his home.

Mei Wong wondered if robbery had been involved? If so, the motive of the crime would be plain. On the other hand, if there had been no theft, it would be a matter of deciding who among Brandon's enemies had taken this way of getting revenge.

At last they came to the big stone house. Mei Wong noted the cars parked in front of it and the bearded, turbaned police officer standing on the front steps. The rickshaw boy wiped his sweaty brow with a filthy rag and then assisted the stout Mei Wong to the sidewalk. He quickly paid the boy and went up the steps.

A policeman ushered him into the semi-darkness of the cool inner hallway. Tall, hawk-faced Inspector Bannerjee was standing there in solemn conversation with a silver-haired man—Walter Brandon's former partner, William Hale.

Seeing him, Inspector Bannerjee broke away from Hale, came forward.

"Good of you to come," he said.

Mei Wong shook hands and sighed.

"I was distressed," he said. "Where did you find him?"

"His stepson found him in his study," the inspector said. "He'd

been working there late last night when the others retired. Cleaning some valuable piece he'd gotten from you."

"A jade tree set with precious stones," Mei Wong told him. "Was it taken?"

The inspector shook his head. "No. Since I imagine it's worth a small fortune we can rule robbery out as a motive."

The old art dealer eyed him gravely. "Then it was a murder of passion. Someone who wanted revenge?"

Inspector Bannerjee touched a hand to his short vandyke beard. "It's a nasty situation. We have three logical suspects. Two of them with excellent reasons for wanting Brandon out of the way. But let us view the body first."

He led Mei Wong down the hallway.

They stopped at a large room that had served Walter Brandon as a den and a display place for his many art treasures.

The murdered man lay on the crimson carpet with the jewelled handle of an antique knife protruding from his back. The chair he'd occupied was overturned beside him and on the desk the jewelled prunus tree in its enamel pot still stood with a cloth and an upset bottle of cleaning fluid beside it.

"This is where Judson Gary, his stepson, found him just before breakfast," the inspector said. "As we've finished with photographs and checking fingerprints we'll be moving the body."

Mei Wong gazed silently at the sprawled, lifeless figure on the carpet. He then stared at the desk.

"The cleaning fluid was spilled, I see," he said. "It is a special formula of my own making. I gave it

to him when he bought the jewelled tree of Yung Cheng."

"I doubt if he knew who drove the knife into him," the inspector said. "He must have died almost at once. Still there was a slight struggle, enough to upset that bottle and the chair."

They left the room and Mei Wong paused in the hallway. "Do you suspect the stepson?" he asked.

The inspector nodded. "We have to, you know. Judson Gary has the most likely motive. His stepfather had been opposing his plans to marry and had threatened to disinherit him."

"Is there a possibility of it being anyone else?" Mei Wong asked.

Inspector Bannerjee gave a perplexed sigh. "Yes. That's one of the reasons I had you come here. By a fantastic coincidence William Hale,

whom you saw when you came in, also spent the night in this house."

Mei Wong's broad face showed interest. "That was most unusual indeed."

"According to Hale he was invited here by Brandon," the inspector went on. "It seems there were still a couple of properties to be settled. Brandon wanted to talk the matter over with Hale and come to some kind of satisfactory arrangement."

Mei Wong reminded the inspector, "Mr. Hale has often claimed to be the victim of Walter Brandon's dishonesty."

The inspector nodded. "I remember all too well. But now Hale claims Brandon wanted to make amends and that was why he called him here."

"In that case," Mei Wong said," it is extremely unlikely that he would have murdered Brandon before he could indulge in his generous gesture."

"Exactly," the inspector agreed. And then spreading his palms in a resigned gesture, he said, "But we have only Hale's word for this. Neither Judson Gary nor Mrs. Brandon seem to know anything about it."

Mei Wong considered a moment. "That leaves only Margaret Brandon as a possible suspect, unless it could be one of the servants."

"The only servant here last night was an elderly man, deaf and infirm," the inspector said. "You can rule him out. Along with Mrs. Brandon as well I'd say. She seems overcome with shock and grief."

"I see," Mei Wong agreed. "So that leaves only the two men."

"I'd say it has to be one of them," Bannerjee said grimly. "I hoped you might have something to add to my small sum of knowledge. You were well acquainted with Walter Brandon. It occurred to me you might have some idea who'd have reason to murder him."

"I haven't much to offer beyond what you've already discovered," Mei Wong said. "But there is one thought that occurs to me. Perhaps if we might talk to all three of them in the living room."

"That can easily be arranged," Inspector Bannerjee promised. "Since they are all three still in the house. The only problem might be Margaret Brandon. She was on the verge of hysteria when I finished questioning her awhile ago."

The inspector left Mei Wong in the living room and went off to get the others. Only a few minutes passed before they filed into the room and greeted Mei Wong. They all showed the tension of the last few hours.

Judson Gary, blond, young and defiant, stood white-faced and cracking his knuckles nervously. Margaret Brandon, his mother and the murdered man's widow, had sorrow written on her pale, lovely face as she sank into the nearest easy chair with a nod to Mei Wong. William Hale was plainly upset

and miserable as he also took a chair.

Inspector Bannerjee surveyed them all coolly.

"As you must know," he said, "Mr. Wong was one of your father's close friends. I have asked him here in the face of this tragedy in the hope he may be able to help."

Judson Gary said, "I don't see how. I think it's another of your stupidities. My stepfather was murdered by some intruder."

The inspector raised his eyebrows. "An interesting theory." His tone became icy." Except there were no signs to suggest an intruder and nothing was stolen."

"He probably ran off after his scuffle with my stepfather," Judson Gary insisted. "He didn't dare to wait to take anything."

William Hale spoke up now. "I do think this young man is right. None of us would want to harm Brandon. It had to be an outsider."

The inspector gave him a knowing glance. "You have often made loud complaints about Brandon to many people."

"I know," Hale admitted quietly. "But I explained that he and I had come to an agreement."

Margaret Brandon fastened her large, blue eyes on the inspector. "You must look elsewhere for your criminal, Inspector. I'm certain neither my son nor Mr. Hale did this dreadful thing."

The inspector gave Mei Wong a look. "Have you any questions?"

The old art dealer nodded and turned to Judson Gary. "You were, I understand, the one who discovered the body?"

The blond young man looked uneasy. "Yes. When I came down to breakfast."

"Then what did you do?" Mei Wong asked.

Gary hesitated. "I ran upstairs and told William Hale what had happened," he said. "Then he came down and we called the police."

"I see," Mei Wong said. "And neither of you told Mrs. Brandon about it until the police arrived?"

William Hale nodded. "We decided it would be better not to. We wanted to spare her the shock and horror—at least until the police arrived." He paused. "I stopped by her room for a moment on the pretext of returning a book she'd given me to read last night. Actually I wanted to keep her from going downstairs for as long as possible."

Mei Wong studied him. "At this time she supposedly knew nothing of the crime. Would you say her behavior was in keeping with this. Quite normal?"

The white-haired man smiled sadly. "Oh, yes. In fact I remember I was touched by her cheerfulness and her casual attitude. I couldn't help thinking of what she was on the brink of discovering, and there she sat chatting and painting her fingernails."

"Painting her fingernails?" Mei Wong said gently.

William Hale glanced toward Margaret Brandon, who sat very still and sickly pale. "You see they've just been done. A crimson shade."

Mei Wong gave his attention to Margaret Brandon for a moment. The widow of the murdered man looked quickly at her hands and then clasped them together as if wanting to hide the vividly painted nails. She lifted her eyes to Mei Wong with an agony of appeal.

The old art dealer turned to Inspector Bannerjee. "When we were in the murdered man's study a few minutes ago I noted that the jewel cleaning fluid I'd given him had been upset. I'm familiar with its various properties and although it can be washed from the hands it leaves a permanent stain on the fingernails that it takes some days to remove.

"I have an idea that Mrs. Brandon's painting of her nails wasn't a casual act but rather a fearful one. She had to remove the evidence of that stain from her fingernails and it wouldn't come off. In fact if you examine the undersides of them now you'll surely find it still there. The stain that will prove she was the one who used that fatal knife."

As he finished speaking Margaret Brandon sprang to her feet, her blue eyes blazing in the pale face.

"Yes, I did it!" she cried. "I had to! He was going to ruin my son's life!" She brought her hands up to cover her face and sank back into the chair again.

Mei Wong and Inspector Bannerjee exchanged understanding glances in the shocked silence broken only by her sobbing. The old art dealer found himself staring in fascination at the vivid red fingernails—the blood red, tell-tale banner of her guilt.

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LION'S LINE

By CARL HENRY RATHJEN

Three killers they were, and she was a woman alone. But one thing she could do.

MACGRUDER first got the idea for the bank job on Bird Wing Island when he saw the Royal Canadian Mounted Police station. Throwing back his leonine head with laughter, he pointed toward

the neat brick building nestled halfway down the hill into Devers, the main 'town' of the island in the Strait of Georgia, between Victoria and the mainland.

"Look, behind the station." His two companions, looking like tourists on fishing holiday, saw a laundry line loaded with diapers. MacGruder laughed heartily. "We've been giving the Mounties too much of a go. They've had to up their manpower by lowering the age limits."

Keenan, a wiry man who was sometimes too quick on the trigger, but deadly, frowned. "Let them, while we just fish."

Bilky, scrawny, balding, smiled and nodded. "We're flush after Winnipeg. We can afford a long holiday."

MacGruder was already braking the car. He backed up the hill to the station. Keenan started to reach into his creel, where he kept a gun handy.

"Have you gone balmy? Every Mountie in Canada is looking for us. Why walk straight into the lion's den?"

"They're not too sure they're looking for us," MacGruder replied, stopping the car. He set the brake and opened the door. "Didn't you notice the garage was empty? The lion isn't here. Just the lioness with the cubs, according to the laundry line. I'm just going to ask her for some fishing information."

Bilky sighed. "I knew I was throwing away money to buy an angler's license."

MacGruder went into the station. Just as he'd surmised, it was a one-man station, for there was no one on duty in the office. The hiss of volume from the radio suggested it was turned high, so important calls could be heard in the living quarters obviously beyond a doorway with the door ajar. He struck a pushbell on the counter.

MacGruder could be charming when he wished. He turned it on now. He quickly and adroitly learned that the young darkhaired 'lioness' was Mrs. Duveen, wife of Corporal Duveen, that she had two children, twins, that her husband was the entire constabulary for the island, except for a three-man boat which patrolled the adjacent waters.

Back in the car and continuing down the hill toward Devers, he reported to his companions after silencing their protests.

"If help is needed, the boat is called in or help is summoned from Vancouver Island or the mainland. They come by ferry or airplane, depending on the urgency. The lioness takes care of that if her husband is too occupied. She's somewhat irked by it, what with cooking, laundering, taking care of the quarters and babies. Thinks there ought to be another man stationed here. So, as I see it, our only problem is Corporal Duveen and keeping the radio and wireless silent."

"They're no problems," Keenan growled. "We're on a holiday. Remember?"

MacGruder nodded. "So let's look over the fishing grounds."

The best fishing place appeared to be the island's one and only bank. The clerks were young and alert, but not too alert. After all, who would attempt anything grandiose on an island? No quick getaway was possible. Ferries were slow and all had radio communication.

A boat could be quickly blockaded before it completed its long escape run. An airplane could be tracked by radar from Victoria and Vancouver, then intercepted by RCMP and military aircraft. MacGruder felt he had the answers, but let his pals have one day of fishing while he unravelled a few final details.

Ten minutes after the bank was quietly held up, MacGruder and Bilky moved in as uninvited guests with Mrs. Duveen. She was washing when they came in the back way. Her dark eyes became darker in a suddenly white face. Her hands trembled, clenching a sheet she had been about to insert in the washer with a load of waiting diapers.

"Continue, please," MacGruder said. He made clucking noises to the babies staring from a playpen. The telephone rang.

"That will probably be the bank," he said. "Tell them you will summon your husband and help. However, you will not contact Victoria or the mainland. You will summon your husband, but do not give him any inkling that you have guests. He is at the south end of the island, investigating a stolen car report."

Mrs. Duveen spoke tensely. "I suppose you arranged that."

"Admitted." MacGruder gestured toward the sound of the phone. "You'd best answer, and mind what you say." He accompanied her as she took the urgent call from the bank. He let her see a gun as she radioed her husband. "There's a report in you'd better attend to promptly. Best not on the air," she said.

"Very good," said MacGruder. "Now you can go back to your washing."

She didn't move. "My babies and I are hostages?"

"For safe conduct," MacGruder said. "Your husband will be advised of that when he arrives. I hope he doesn't prove stubborn about it. One of my companions is very triggerish."

When they returned to the living quarters, Keenan had arrived after disposing of the car. MacGruder spoke to him.

"Corporal Duveen will be here in about ten minutes. Don't be hasty. Give him a chance to speak his mind."

"He'd better speak right," Keenan muttered.

MacGruder clucked over the playpen.

"What have we here?" he remarked. "This one needs a change." His big hands gently swept up the child.

Mrs. Duveen stepped forward in panic. Keenan held a gun before her. She was going to ignore it, eyes only for her baby.

"No sweat, m'dear," MacGruder assured her.

Talking in half-song to the baby, he placed it across his knees. In frightened awe, Mrs. Duveen watched as he talced and deftly unfolded and placed the fresh cloth.

"You've done that before," she managed to say.

"Had one of my own before my wife ran away with him. Poor fool she was. I would have fought the world for them."

Mrs. Duveen stared at his grim face, though he was still gentle with her child. "Too bad you couldn't have fought honestly so she would have felt you worthy of them."

"We are what we are," said MacGruder. "You knew what your man was before you married him. You're not too pleased here either, are you?"

Young Mrs. Duveen bit her lip. "I was proud of him, proud to be of help—" She caught her lip again.

"Before the children came," said MacGruder. "Best get on with the chores. I'll change the other one. And remember, when he arrives, you're still madly in love with him."

Mrs. Duveen closed her eyes briefly, then began hanging out diapers from the pulley line by the window. Stopping the washer, she inserted the soiled changes, then hung out sheets. Keenan muttered it was almost ten minutes, and checked his gun. So did Bilky.

MacGruder tested the nipples of the babies' bottles and leaned over the playpen. Mrs. Duveen, moving stiffly, hung out diapers. Bilky, watching the road suddenly spoke.

"Here he comes!"

They waited tensely, then heard a car go on by down toward town. Bilky spun toward the corporal's wife. "Did she—"

MacGruder put a hand over Keenan's gun. "It's an island. News gets around fast. He probably heard about the bank. That's where he's going. He'll be back. Right?" he suddenly asked Mrs. Duveen.

She nodded involuntarily. "Please, when he comes—"

MacGruder interrupted. "Just pray he doesn't act heroic." He picked up one of the babies and cradled it in his arm as it suckled

the bottle. His other hand gripped a gun.

Mrs. Duveen moved her lips several times before she managed to speak. "He may call me or the mainland or Victoria on the radio."

MacGruder nodded. "I'd call him first, if I were you, and tell him everything's been tended to. Go with her, Bilky."

"I don't like it," said Keenan, fingering his gun.

"He's getting our descriptions," said MacGruder. "Takes time. Witnesses' stories conflict. Why do you think I had us all wear so many different colors in hats, shirts, coats, pants?"

Finally, Bilky called softly, but sharply, "He's here."

In the Next Issue—

A RUN OF LUCK

A Thrilling New MIKE SHAYNE Adventure

by BRETT HALLIDAY

He was a ruthless, go-for-broke plunger in a game where the stakes were too high. Mike Shayne sat in—beside a cool shadowy customer named Death!

In a few moments Bilky spoke from the doorway. "He asked her to stand by."

"She'd better stay there then," agreed MacGruder. "You stay with her. I'll look after the tikes, m'am," he called reassuringly. "Bilky, let me know when he pulls up out front."

It seemed like a long wait.

MacGruder, with gun ready and a baby in the crook of his left arm, moved to the office door. Through the front window he could see the chunky Mountie getting out of the car, spurred shiny boots, work-a-day drabs, flat-brimmed hat, lanyarded pistol in its holster with the flap fastened down. Corporal Duveen was alone. His boots sound-

ed sharply to the door. It opened.

Mrs. Duveen stifled a gasp as she sat by the radio with Bilky right beside her, his gun ready to swing toward her husband. MacGruder saw the corporal quickly take it all in.

The corporal spoke first, loudly. "I must warn you—"

A door burst open behind MacGruder. Keenan started to shout something. The sound of a shot and breaking glass mingled. Corporal Duveen moved fast as MacGruder's attention briefly wavered. The Mountie had a gun in his left hand, not the one from the holster.

"Drop it, your gun," he commanded MacGruder.

By the radio Mrs. Duveen had diverted Bilky's gun, was on her feet and was flipping him sprawling with some judo. Feet pounded behind MacGruder.

"Drop the gun," another voice commanded.

MacGruder obeyed. Keenan was on the floor, moaning and writhing in pain. MacGruder saw Mounties in drabs, and a couple in dungarees such as they wore on the patrol boat.

"All right," he said. "Mind your guns. I'm just going to put the tike down, that's all." Under ready guns he gently placed the baby in the pen with its twin. Later, handcuffed, he asked, "What went wrong?"

"Nothing," said Corporal Duveen, giving his wife a warm smile. She smiled in return, and proudly.

She faced MacGruder. "You were right. It is trying for me, watching the station, the babies, the quarters, and all. But such is life, and we do what is expected and right, which you never learned."

"You've made your point," MacGruder said. "Now how did you warn him?"

Mrs. Duveen gestured toward the laundry line. It was hung with three diapers, three long sheets, three diapers again.

"Any wireless operator would recognize that," she said. "Three dots, three dashes, three dots. SOS."

"I'll be hooked," MacGruder muttered.

"You are, and for a long time," Corporal Duveen said. He gestured to the other mounties to take the prisoners away. Then he turned to his wife.

"I'm proud of you."

"I'm not completely myself," she said, staring after MacGruder. "Too bad. He had such a way with the babies. That's something you can still learn to do better, my dear."

And despite that remark, she gave her corporal husband a very unofficial and fervent kiss.

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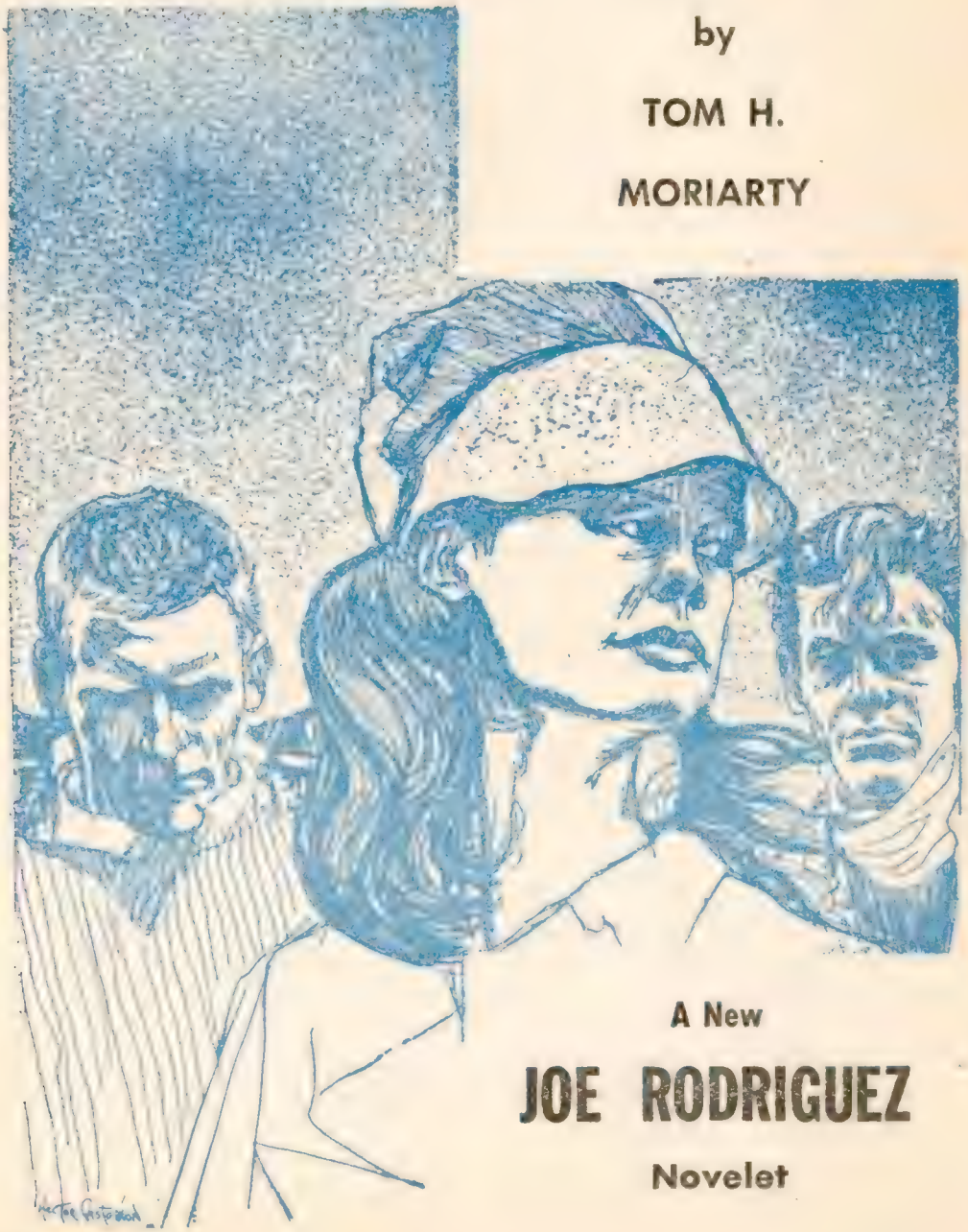
LOOT FOR HAWAII

by

TOM H.

MORIARTY



A New

JOE RODRIGUEZ

Novelet

It started like a quiet Christmas—
that is, until arson, big time crime and murder
suddenly decided to join the party.

CHRISTMAS CAME on a Friday. Whether that was good or bad from a detective's standpoint could be argued either way, depending on your assignment. Friday meant no Saturday last-minute shopping traffic nightmares, smaller crowds for pickpockets, fewer stores open for boosters to work.

Friday also meant the long weekend ahead, with thousands of people vacating their homes earlier and remaining away longer, thus offering a berry patch to the largest invisible horde of house thieves concentrated in any one section of the nation.

Jose Juan Rodriguez, young plain-clothesman on the night watch at Hollywood Division, was inclined to think that Friday was a good day for Christmas, inasmuch as his beat had to do mostly with weirdos, con men, vice purveyors, impulse murderers, and not particularly with burglars.

So far, the evening hours of Thursday were uneventful. Joe Rodriguez sat in the squad room at the De Longpre station house, smoking one of Lieutenant Fred Bennett's Christmas cigars, and leafing through a stack of flyers from city, county, and state agencies of law enforcement. By contrast, he had investigated a rooming house suicide and an office building Christmas party fight by eight o'clock last year.

If this new slow pace kept up, Rodriguez could see himself arriving in East Los Angeles fit as a fiddle in the morning for the annual Christmas family reunion held by his parents.

At eight-thirty-seven the intercom jarred Joe Rodriguez's wishful thinking. He pushed his homework aside and hurried to the commander's office.

"You know how Valley has been in the meat grinder," Bennett said.

"They get five million dollars in new facilities at Van Nuys and the rate of juvenile crime still goes up. Well, Captain Engle got a break just a few minutes ago. An informant tipped them on a Christmas Eve house robbery due in North Hollywood. It's the first bonafide tip-off in weeks.

"I don't have to tell you, Joe, that it's not just one house they're interested in protecting. It's a chance to learn something about what particular kind of nutballs are knocking over all these homes.

"At any rate, Engle called for you to beef up his team. Consider yourself attached to his staff for the moment. He's cleared it with Central Division. Try to get back by one o'clock. I got a little tip-off myself from downtown. The chief may be dropping in by then on his holiday greeting rounds. Any questions?"

"Was the informant a man or woman?" Rodriguez asked. He had noted a growing number of San Quentin quail among teenagers on his Hollywood Boulevard trick. The new pattern was one girl and three boys in a nuisance group.

"Good question," said Bennett. "If a girl informed, then some other little broad beat her time with a junior torpedo—and she's sore. A woman scorned. Engle's your man with the answers. Better get going. Maybe they're breaking the sliding glass window right now."

Joe Rodriguez needed no reminder. He knew a lot about the San Fernando valley. More than 850,000 people lived there, enough people in homes and multiples to populate San Francisco or Buffalo. It was a loose-knit community, cross-hatched with freeways and boasting fifteen separate towns, all connected by residential areas.

In many homes, both parents worked. Young people were left unsupervised by day or night. Some observers attributed the high crime rate chiefly to unfilled hours, to unfulfilled ambitions of an extensive unrooted junior world. No one had been able to prove this. But the newspapers went on reporting several dozen robberies a week—of homes, banks, service stations, liquor stores; adding up to a sizable chunk of Los Angeles' city-wide 20,000-plus annual crime incidents.

Rodriguez hurried to the parking lot, jumped in his private-licensed car, and headed up Wilcox in order to catch the Hollywood Freeway.

It was no surprise in the least to the detective that thieves should pick Christmas Eve. Piles of valuable gifts nestling around the Christmas tree furnished bonus enough for holiday work.

The Los Angeles police department well knew this highlight in the general M.O. But every house could not be watched.

Rodriguez came on the double to the modern complex of the new Van Nuys police headquarters.

Nonetheless, he was too late to participate in the stake-out of the North Hollywood house.

Engle, a chunky six-footer with the deep red-brown pigmentation of an American Indian, looked up from his desk and said, "We got 'em cold. They're coming in now."

He passed a slip of paper to Rodriguez and continued, saying, "After we check them out, go down to the Pontchartrain and talk to Don Glendon, the owner. The station wagon used by the thieves is a brand new lease car registered to the restaurant corporation. It may have been stolen. It may have been borrowed. Mr. Glendon should have information on who has access to his cars."

Word now came from the desk sergeant that the robber team had arrived—a girl, two juveniles, and an older leader. Engle ordered the youngsters to his office. They walked in escorted by Sergeant Omar Fey, a harness cop who had directed the ambush and arrest.

The perky little blonde was seventeen. She was now out of character—a scared rabbit, as her tear-filled blue eyes proclaimed. She said that she went along with the wagon driver, Bill Cathcarts, only because "that pill Louise-Mary" was trying to steal Bill from her.

Young Cathcarts was a harmless patsy, appearing hardly capable on his own of swiping hub caps or siphoning off gas from cars in parking lots.

The younger of the two working thieves was twenty-one-year-old Arnold Macklin.

Joe Rodriguez judged that Macklin might be a surf bum because of the salt-burnished weathering, the muscles, and the sun-streaked yellow hair. Macklin asked to be put in a different cell than that of the other working thief, Jed Wyman.

"Sir, I didn't really want to rob," Macklin said. "But I needed the money. I couldn't get a decent job."

"Like say ten grand a year bending pretzels?" Engle said caustically.

"I mean I got talked into it. Jed made it sound easy."

"And Jed Wyman is the boss man. Where does Wyman hang out?"

"I don't know. All I know is he gets in touch with the fellows he wants."

Engle snorted, "You're a strong, husky young fellow. You could have gotten a job if you tried hard enough."

"That's what I'm beginning to think now," said Macklin. "They sold me on doing good and moving up. People like Buzz Boyen would know I'm alive."

The name Boyen evidently rang a bell with Engle. Joe saw the captain stiffen slightly, as he ordered the teen-agers and Macklin to isolation and protective custody.

Engle flipped the intercom and said, "Bring in Wyman."

Jed Wyman had to be a professional heist man, Rodriguez judged, the second the surly man walked in. He was handcuffed with wrists in front and a body chain wrapped around and connected with the cuffs. This was because he had resisted arrest.

In spite of this, Wyman gave the effect of a pantherish athlete in the pink of condition. A close-cropped scrub of black hair framed a strong and flinty face. Narrowed, sunken eyes were grey-blue. They were prison eyes, conditioned by solitude and submerged hate.

Captain Engle held up a large card, close to his eyes. "Eighteen months in Tracy. Conspiracy to defraud. Nineteen sixty-two discharge," he read. "Hoeing sugar beets should have taught you better, Wyman. Deuel Vocational Rehabilitation is a soft-touch institution. This time you can expect San Quentin."

Wyman gazed back at the captain with no definite expression—no contempt, no open hate, no insolence. He replied, "I want my telephone call and a lawyer. I'm entitled to my request."

"You're not booked yet—" Engle said.

"This man arrested me," said Wyman. "I have my rights. Book me and let me call out."

He certainly did have such rights, Joe considered. And the new interpretation of state law regarding treatment of prime suspects was the legal clincher. The captain now could only play it cool.

"We haven't booked you yet," said Engle. "When we do, you get your call. What kind of a guy are you anyway, Wyman, introducing innocent kids to crime? That little girl looks to me like she came from a convent."

"The kid was the driver's girl friend," Wyman said. "I don't know a thing about her and care less. She didn't have to go along."

Meantime, the desk sergeant had come in with messages for Engle and phone calls had demanded his personal handling.

The captain was forced into a spot decision.

He said, "Take him away, Sergeant. Book him on the counts of attempted armed robbery and resisting an officer. Let's see if he can stir up a mouthpiece on Christmas Eve."

The moment the door closed on the departing Wyman, Engle went to a file case, studied a card marked Boyen, and said, "We're in luck, Joe. Boyen works for the Pontchartrain. Don Glendon and I are on the same Red Cross team. I happen to know that Don has a party for the help after closing every Christmas Eve. Boyen should certainly be there."

It was now nearing ten-thirty of Christmas Eve. The valley was ablaze with strings of red, green, blue lights outlining about a third of the houses on every block.

Rodriguez was glad to be a part of it, driving along with blasts of Yule music in his ears. Joe had that forward viewpoint of the young. He was an ideal choice to work any case involving frustrations and fatigue.

His looks were deceiving at first, always. In his career, only six years out of police academy, several one-punch bar fighters had found out too late that it was unwise to resent a slim, handsome fellow just because he had a touch of breeding in his face.

What a contrast, Joe thought, between the holiday outpouring of good will and the atmosphere created by men like Jed Wyman. Rodriguez wondered how many there were in the valley like this man—a lieutenant of thieves, undoubtedly a power in the still-unknown pattern of robbery on a business basis.

II

RODRIGUEZ drove into the tailored grounds of the Pontchartrain Restaurant on Ventura Boulevard, into an extensive parking lot containing scarcely a dozen automobiles.

Christmas Eve was not a night for late patrons. No car hustlers were on duty, which suggested to him that the owner's annual party must be in progress in the lit-up hulk of a building that outwardly resembled a French chateau. A giant red neon sign spreading across its cupolas read *The Pontchartrain—Your Dining Room Away from Paris.*

Luxury began at the very entrance of the Pontchartrain, Rodriguez saw. A bright red carpet ran over slate tile, up to massive oak doors. Joe let himself in and immediately saw to his left a wing of the chateau lively with tables of diners.

"I'd like to see Mr. Glendon," Joe explained to a jolly-faced man in a tuxedo, who came over to him as he entered the room.

"If it's for dining, sir, we are closed for the night," the man said. He waited; then continued, after observing the flat set of Joe's motionless eyes. "Who shall I say is here, sir?"

"Rodriguez, Los Angeles police. A routine matter." Rodriguez ruffled his coat back wide to show his badge.

Don Glendon came to Rodriguez at once. Joe pegged him as approaching forty, a once strong man who had let his limber six-foot two-inch frame pad up with excess weight. A direct probing stare was in his pale hazel eyes.

"Captain Engle wants some information about a man named Boyen," Rodriguez said after shaking hands.

"Buzz Boyen? What's he done, the rascal? Ran a red light? Say we drop into my office and be more comfortable. How is Cap getting along?"

At his desk, Glendon turned serious, as Joe related the facts of the aborted heist.

"It's undoubtedly a mistake of some sort," Glendon replied. "Buzz is not here now. He had some last-minute errand in connection with our catering department and he hasn't returned yet."

"Do you have a personnel card on him? I'd like to make a few notes."

"I was hoping you wouldn't ask that," Glendon said wryly. He pulled out a desk drawer and brought up a card. "But after all, you have to know. Buzz Boyen is a probationer. He served a year for attempted mayhem, as they used the phrase, against a man who was making a play for his divorced wife. That kind of charge doesn't bother me. It happens every day."

Rodriguez took the card and noted that Bert A. Boyen was thirty-five, an Army veteran of the Korean War, a high school graduate, born in Missouri, came to California with his parents at the age of four. He had been arrested in Burbank in 1956, pleaded guilty, and was sentenced to two years in the Soledad correctional prison, where model behavior reduced his time to one year and probation of indefinite period.

The key question now had to do with how Mr. Glendon had learned all this about his employee, Joe asked.

"Buzz started as a substitute car hustler, a fellow we put on in an emergency. He set an example for the rest of them. At that time he told me about his probation matter and I talked with the Adult Authority. As time passed, I saw we had found the right man at last to run the parking lot, so I promoted him."

"Does he call the shots on who uses the station wagon?"

"We have three," said Glendon. "He took one of them on his errand. It could have been stolen from him. Maybe that's why we haven't heard from him yet."

"I think he would have called you right away," said Rodriguez. "Probationers are extra careful to protect their good standing."

"In that case, he could have

been harmed. They might have dropped him off some place in a lonely spot."

"Well, we can only wait and see. Meantime, Mr. Glendon, I'm sorry you had to leave your party. I'll be on my way."

"Not a bit, not a bit," said Glendon. He was now the genial host again. "I'd like you to join us for a minute and say hello to a few people. They'll get a kick out of seeing a real detective in the flesh."

"Since it's Christmas," said Joe, "okay. Quick in, quick out, though."

Joe Rodriguez went into the commotion of the dining wing. Champagne corks were popping. Waiters took turns serving fellow waiters, bus boys, office girls, the public relations man, and assistant cooks. The conversation gurgled in five languages. Joe shook hands with Armando Ycazo, the handsome 250-pound *maitre d* who looked like a South American prime minister; with the chef and with Artie Saxe, the lively assistant captain, who turned out to be the man who had first greeted him.

From this group, Don Glendon escorted the detective to his wife, introducing her as Jenna Forza. The background of the slightly plump and comely olive-skinned blonde was known to Rodriguez.

Miss Forza was still a very minor female force in Hollywood movie and TV circles. At thirty-six, she retained the advantage of emerald green eyes which showed up spectacularly in Technicolor close-ups.

Jenna's eyes sparked. Rodriguez apparently appeared a movie detective to her. The only thing Joe lacked was the tailored trench coat.

"He didn't say a word about my office," Glendon said to his wife.

"What kind of a Mike Shayne are you?" Jenna kidded. "Don's office is the set from my Academy nomination picture, *The Third Millionaire*. I gave it to Don five years ago, on the fifth anniversary of Pontchartrain."

The set was indeed part of an old movie. Joe could not recall Jenna being in the picture, let alone what category her nomination had come in. But her statement placed the restaurant as a ten-year institution. Ten years of obvious success represented a birdie for the tough restaurant course in Southern California.

It was now nearing midnight on Christmas Eve. Joe made his excuses over a second glass of champagne and drove back to Van Nuys police headquarters. He wondered if his tenure was up. He hoped that he would be able to return to Hollywood Division before one o'clock in the morning, as Lieutenant Bennett had urged.

One look at the harassed captain shot down Joe's hopes. Engle had three phones in front of him and each was off the hook. He listened and yelled into one and im-

mediately dropped it for another. Then he took up the third and soon went back to the first.

Sergeant Omar Fey came over to Rodriguez and said, "All hell's broken loose. Three big estates have been robbed. Details are coming in now. Our early job turned out to be peanuts. Now we got mink coat, wall-safe stuff."

Rodriguez learned in the next several minutes that the homes of a movie name, the Valley's biggest Ford dealer, and a millionaire developer of senior citizens villages had been the heists, with $86,000, $73,000, and $124,000 respectively, the estimated value of the jewelry, furs, clothes, TV color sets, stereos, and money stolen. Christmas Eve had been the wrong time to dismiss the servants and leave luxury homes dark. The places had been cased, staked, and entered without suspicion.

"What happened to our kids?" Joe asked. The repentance of Macklin had intrigued the young detective.

"The captain released Bill Cathcarts and the girl into custody of their parents," said Fey. "That leaves us with Macklin. Jed Wyman made his phone call. The bondsman showed up pronto. Wyman is free as smog on this delightful Christmas morning."

So it was Christmas morning, Rodriguez was reminded. Joe went to the snug harbor of the headquarters cafeteria, drank coffee, and ate a piece of Danish. He was waiting out Captain Engle, and ready to ask him if he was now off the hook.

His name sounded on the intracommunications speaker.

"Officer J. J. Rodriguez. Report to Captain Engle at once." Joe ran.

"Wyman is being brought in to Valley Doctors Hospital emergency ward," said Engle. "We winged him escaping from the neighborhood of the real estate man's heist. Get on down there, Joe, and find out what you can. You'll have to stay with us a little longer. I'll call Bennett and square you."

"Yes, sir," said Rodriguez.

As he hurried off, the grim humor of the order struck him. He called back, "Merry Christmas, Captain."

III

BUT IT was not merry at all in the tiny emergency bay of Valley Doctors Hospital. A tracheotomy was being performed on a nice little old lady by an interne, assisted by a nurse, behind a flimsy half-curtain. The woman's frantic try for air was loud and sorrowful. A blonde girl with a fractured wrist lay on a portable operating table, while a nurse zipped in a syringe of morphine and an orthopedic wizard studied the X-ray picture, ready to form a new bind of bones. A policeman in uniform stood beyond another half-curtain.

Rodriguez ducked into that cubi-

cle. Jed Wyman lay stretched on a mobile operating table. His shirt was off and the leg of the left trouser had been scissored and pulled away. Bullets had entered below the left shoulder and through the lower right thigh. A doctor probed swiftly at the thigh. The shoulder wound was already dressed. Wyman gazed at the ceiling with glassy eyes.

When the doctor called quits, Rodriguez palmed his I.D. card before the man and the two of them left the ward to talk.

"He's failing fast," the doctor said. "The shoulder bullet caromed down below the lung cage. X-ray shows it has critically penetrated vital parts. We haven't the facilities for major surgery here tonight. We'll have to send him to County General. He may already be beyond help."

"I would like to try to get him to talk," said Rodriguez.

"Go ahead. I've shot him out of the worst pain."

Joe went back to the Wyman slot. Voices sounded loud around him, as doctors called instructions to assistants. Then a freeway crash victim was rushed in on an ambulance gurney. It was like holding an interview at a ball park during a big inning. Noisy. Tense.

"Jed Wyman?" Jeo said loudly to the disinterested man. "I'm Rodriguez. Los Angeles police."

Wyman shifted his eyes to Joe and said nothing.

"They're taking you to County General for surgery," Rodriguez said. "This happens to be Christmas. Can I do anything for you—make a call to friends or relatives?"

A flicker of alertness came back into Wyman's eyes. He had evidently heard the noise around him. There was no apparent resentment in him. Joe listened, close to his mouth.

"I never thought a cop could ever chain me up," Wyman said.

Rodriguez now said, "They're going to wheel you out of here in a minute, Wyman. Do you want me to help you if I can?"

"I kind of trust you," Wyman said. "I think I'm cooked. I feel it way down deep. Call the doc. I want to say a will. Witnesses."

The doctor, listening on the other side of the half-curtain, stepped in.

"There's a key sewed into the back pocket of my pants," Wyman said. "The key opens safe deposit

box bank Victory Boulevard and Laurel Canyon. There's sixty thousand dollars. C-notes. It's mine straight. Won it on horses. Paid income tax in year nineteen sixty-three. Check Federal Building. Under gambling winnings, like the man said. If I kick the bucket, give one-third Tracy prisoners fund, one-third Soledad prisoners fund, one-third Main Street Rescue Mission."

"How about the bail bond people?" said Joe.

"I signed my Malibu lot. They're covered."

"Any message for Buzz Boyen?" said Rodriguez.

"Buzz Boyen? I don't owe him a cent."

"You used his station wagon tonight."

"I don't owe him a cent. I gave him a good day's work—" Wyman opened his mouth, trying to talk more. No sound came. His head nodded and his eyes dilated. The doctor took a pulse.

"Gone," he said. "Nurse. Autopsy room. Bring back his trousers right away."

In the hospital cafeteria, after 1:00 A.M. on Christmas morning, the doctor cut a sewed piece of pocket out of Wyman's pants and extracted a brass key.

"It's a safe deposit box key, all right," said Joe. "I hope the rest of the story is on the level."

Rodriguez drove back to Van Nuys Headquarters with one speculation on the top of his mind: was Buzz Boyen in the set-up, or was he being used by smarter thieves who might be intimidating him?

Captain Clarence Engle was thinking of other matters.

"Put down these figures, Joe," he said. "Sherrie Marne, the movie star, and her husband, returned from a party and found their house robbed. We covered at once. Clayboe, the Ford dealer, returned home with his wife and family at eleven fifty-five and reported their robbery. We covered again right away. The real estate millionaire William Cribbins reported robbery a few minutes later.

"On the map, the homes are two to three miles apart, about five minutes traffic driving. Our prowl car was near the Cribbins home and got there a few minutes after the report. Jed Wyman was evidently left to fend for himself. Our man caught a shadow moving in the garden and shot him down. But the house had already been robbed and the goods gone. You see what I'm trying to prove, Joe?"

"A railroad timetable," said Rodriguez. "Speed merchants inside the houses. And Wyman definitely part of an organization, knowing where and when to join them after bail sprung him. He died on the table, Captain. He left sixty grand in cash in a safe deposit box, he said."

"Holy Christopher!" said Engle. "That does it. We've thought all

along in terms of juvenile heists, by ratty kids after ready money. It begins to look like real pros."

"Wyman is certainly a new kind of pro," said Joe. "Look at how he organized his life. Safe deposit box. Paid income tax. He was like a business man setting up his own social security."

"And that's the real hell of it," said Engle. "Crooks have traditionally been irresponsible, selfish fools with big egos and little brains. Always in hiding. I'm afraid that's old hat now. The crooks we are up against regard law-breaking merely as a daring moonlighter's trade. They work at it while remaining a visible part of the community."

"Right. Else how could Wyman reach down and select Macklin? How could Macklin put his hands on two agreeable stooges like the kids?"

"If we got a conspiracy in this Valley, we'll damn soon find out," said Engle.

"No sign of Boyen yet?"

"No dice. He's on the pick-up boards all over town."

Rodriguez then suggested that he double-check the Pontchartrain Restaurant garage and see if the missing station wagon had been returned.

The office of Don Glendon was not only lit up brightly, Rodriguez saw up close, but the owner himself and his wife were inside. Blonde Jenna sat in the man's posture chair and sullenly watched his pacing in front of the log desk. Glendon was obviously angry and excited. He waved his arms. He made sudden turn-abouts in his pacing. His mouth action pantomimed shouting words.

A family quarrel, Joe judged. He wished that he was a better lip reader, or that a contact bug good enough to penetrate the wall was available. Glendon appeared to be really telling off his wife about something.

Out of range of the window's light, Rodriguez and the uniformed officer he had taken with him, circled around the edges of the near-deserted parking lot. A white station wagon, a duplicate of the North Hollywood heist vehicle, was parked in a stall. Two other marked-out stalls were empty.

Putting his flashlight on the wagon, Rodriguez saw that its tonneau was loaded with a packing box roughly four by four by six. A manifest envelope was tacked to the top and "This Side Up—Perishables" was stencilled in two places. A light mist rose fitfully from the slats of joined wood.

Mystified, Rodriguez opened the tail gate and climbed inside. His hand on the cold case told him at once that the mist was from an inner layer of dry ice, such as used for short haul refrigerating of foods.

"Ortolans Pontchartrain" were the contents of the box. The destination was Newark, New Jersey, Airport. The consignee was Westar

Food Distributors of New York City.

Glendon had mentioned the catering department of his restaurant. Rodriguez had thought of it as a local activity, serving Valley families and organizations on festive occasions. He took it for granted now that the ortolans must be a food specialty of some sort, one that had achieved acceptance by restaurants or deluxe delicatessens elsewhere. He made notes of the manifest, seeing that it was destined for the Weed Brothers Air Freight Lines at Lockheed Airport in Burbank.

A sound of door-slamming across the parking lot now brought Rodriguez and his companion to strict attention. They looked, saw Jenna Forza hurrying alone to a Mercedes-Benz SL-150 convertible, and saw the bulky silhouette of Don Glendon nearing them.

"Duck," said Rodriguez. They crouched behind a tool bench and waited.

Don Glendon got in behind the wheel of the wagon, backed out, and drove off through the parking lot. Jenna Forza and her sports car were now out of sight.

"I'm going to tail him," said Rodriguez.

They trotted back to the prowl car. Soon they were on the Ventura Freeway, with the white wagon in their sights far ahead.

At the Hollywood Way outlet in Burbank, on connecting Riverside Freeway, the wagon went off, and proceeded north towards Lockheed Airport. Following well behind, the prowl car drove into the Weed Brothers area, doused lights, and saw the wagon at a distance. Freight handlers were taking the packing case out of the tonneau.

The wagon soon departed. Rodriguez did not follow this time. He paid a call on the air freight receiving office.

"Just checking," he told the man in charge, after identifying himself. "That case from the Pontchartrain Restaurant. What kind of an article is an ortolan?"

"I wondered myself," the man said and laughed. "It's some kind of table delicacy. The restaurant people ship a case or two every month."

Rodriguez thanked the man and left quickly. It was now three o'clock on Christmas morning. Joe was getting hungry, but his stomach was not thinking in terms of an ortolan. He was contemplating a breakfast steak, seared crunchy on the outside to retain hot, savory juices. He thoughts were tantalizing—before they swiftly vanished.

IV

ENROUTE BACK to Van Nuys Police Headquarters, the talker on the radio-telephone board called for Rodriguez. Captain Engle came on a phone, roaring this time.

"Don Glendon's house has been

knocked over. Go there at once. Encino. Castelleja Road, a mile south of Ventura Boulevard. Mrs. Glendon is alone."

Rodriguez and his driver sirened their way west on Ventura. What a Christmas, thought Joe. This was the night that he had originally pegged for a quiet watch.

The prowl car tore at seventy miles an hour to the estate driveaway. Like the restaurant, the Glendon home was a French chateau and equally as big, only this time it was built of authentic wood and stone all over.

Jenna Forza huddled in the light of the massive entrance door.

The blonde stunner was no longer poised, as she had been at the party, nor sullen, as she had been while listening to her husband's angry lecture in the office. She appeared shaken up and at the same time subdued. Rodriguez took her arm and escorted her inside to a chaise lounge in a vaulting parlor with red silk wall coverings.

"All of my mink coats, all of my jewel boxes, all of my best clothes, even to the shoes," she said. "Only part of it is insured. And Don doesn't know that."

"Did they go after anything else in the house? Your husband's effects?"

"I don't know. I haven't looked yet. Oh, yes, they rifled my writing desk. I keep a few thousand dollars handy there. It's gone."

A commotion at the front door heralded the arrival home of Don Glendon. He looked in, did not say a word, and rushed up the spiral staircase to the second floor.

"The servants are drunk, sleeping off a Christmas bat," Jenna said. "Fine protection, that."

"Mr. Glendon was away also?" said Rodriguez. He was now checking her out for simple honesty.

"He stayed at the restaurant after the Christmas party," she said, "to attend to some last minute maters. I stayed a while myself. I felt like getting some air and I drove to Santa Monica on the San Diego Freeway. It was pleasant and I drove around a bit."

Rodriguez left her with the prowl officer and went upstairs to Don Glendon.

Glendon was seated at a home office desk, going through the drawers. The expression on his handsome face was of simple disgust, no more, no less. He was neither agitated nor hopping mad. Things other than robbery evidently made him mad.

"Five thousand dollars from the safe and every last article of value I possess," he said evenly. "I'm probably covered, but it's just the idea of it. That two-fifty watch, it had my fraternal award engraved on the back."

Rodriguez considered that the robbery was not exactly going to make a pauper out of the man. He asked for and got a detailed list of

the missing cash and objects, then shot a few questions which, he felt, were overdue.

"I understand the third station wagon is not back yet," Rodriguez said.

"No, it isn't," said Glendon. "You have one of them in your custody. I have one. You're probably wondering if I've changed my mind about Buzz Boyen. Well, I confess that I've been doing an awful lot of thinking."

Rodriguez then told the man about Jed Wyman losing no time in going from bail bond freedom to participation in another robbery. The detective omitted the fact that Wyman was dead. It was in Captain Engle's province to release that item.

"The facts place Boyen in close association with Wyman," said Rodriguez. "Wyman admitted working on your parking lot."

"No," said Glendon. "A professional burglar working for us?"

"How long or when, I don't know. But it's all the more reason why we have to find Boyen."

Glendon shuffled through a file of photos in a drawer and pulled out two prints. They were staff groups for publicity.

"There's Boyen," he said. "He's sure got to explain a lot of things to me before I take him back."

Rodriguez decided to play his high card. "When I cased your garage area," he said, "I noticed a packing case in a wagon. Was that the errand that Boyen was supposed to do? Deliver that case?"

Glendon smiled wryly.

"You hit it, my friend," he said. "That case should have gone to air freight earlier in the evening. So Boyen disappears and the staff gets full of liquor and goes home. And I find the case in the catering department about to spoil. Two thousand dollars worth of Ortolans Pontchartrain for the New York New Year's trade. I had to take the stuff down to the airport myself."

"I see, goods easily damaged."

"Easily damaged is right. An ortolan is an odd little food gimmick. Our chef used to make them in Paris with buntings, small birds. He worked out a different version for us and it clicked. A few more hours and we would have had to throw that case away."

There was nothing much more for the police to do at Glendon's home except extend condolences. The thieves had simply worked very fast and left no incriminating evidence. A print man examined likely places for fingerprints, including those of servants, but found all surfaces wiped clean.

Strangely, this personal disaster was not the end of the hard luck cycle for Don Glendon and Jenna Forza. As Joe Rodriguez walked out to the prowl car, his assistant yelled from the driver's compartment, "Joe, captain says Pontchartrain Restaurant is on fire. We're ordered there now."

Rodriguez swung around and ran inside the house. Glendon and his wfe were in the foyer, glaring at each other as they talked.

"Mr. Glendon," Joe yelled, "your restaurant is on fire." Don Glendon stared back blankly, then sat down, still expressionless. Jenna Forza appeared shocked speechless.

As the prowl car howled east on Ventura Boulevard, a faint glow on the horizon lightened the black sky a bit.

A restaurant with its cooking materials, flues, and stacks of flammables would go up like a kerosene torch. Food stores, decorations, linen, all were perfect fire-breeders. The false cupolas on the giant chateau and the many chimneys were draft creators in themselves.

A fair-sized crowd had already clogged the broad boulevard when they approached close enough to see their first crackling pillars of flame. Fire equipment was still maneuvering in the street. A hose was playing water against the great neon sign, but with no reduction of the interior blaze. The prowl car shot in past a line of three guarding policemen, and Rodriguez stepped out.

The Pontchartrain was doomed, he judged at once. As he took in the situation, a slab of wall in the back cracked off and plunged down in a shower of flaming chunks over the maintenance area. Gasoline and oil ignited in patches. A mighty boom could be the only prediction, Rodriguez knew, having seen the gasoline pump, where fire now raged.

Another hose now went into action, shooting water right through beautifully draped chateau windows. Flames climbed higher, encouraged by new pressures of fierce air drafts. Down went the neon sign, crashing through the inadequate roof.

In the rear of the yellow-etched building, a fireman wrestled a line of hose into position, intending to play water on the maintenance area. Suddenly there was no need for this. *Boom.* The maintenance shed seemed to soar in a warped piece, twenty feet in the air, a living wreckage of orange and red, wrapped in swirling smoke.

Rodriguez went back to the line of spectators behind the police. There was nothing he could do to help the firefighters. He wanted now to observe the crowd. Notorious arsonists commonly were in the first row of big blazes they had started. He wondered if he would have any luck in spotting a psycopath. At least he could search out Don Glendon and his wife, and assist them.

Rodriguez moved about, in and out of groups of awe-struck spectators. They were late party homecomers and had driven their cars into a true spectacle, one seldom seen outside of the TV news coverage. They were also home-owners

from the back hill streets of Sherman Oaks, awakened by the sirens, bull horns, and the squawk and rumble of firefighting vehicles.

A spectator with his hands to his face, shielding eyes against the now soaring blaze of the gasoline explosion, removed those hands. The mental photograph of Buzz Boyen was in the detective's mind, from the study of the group pictures in Don Glendon's home.

Rodriguez noted that there was anguish in the face. "Hello, Mr. Boyen," he said. He looked the man hard in the eyes, and this time, being up close, he saw a flick of tears.

"Hello," the man said.

"You're under arrest, Boyen," said Rodriguez. "Suspicion of conspiracy to commit grand theft. Walk straight to that police car and get in."

Rodriguez took out his service pistol and shoved it up close to the now shaky Boyen.

"Why not?" said Boyen. "Everything's over now."

It was four and dead dark on Christmas morning when Rodriguez marched Buzz Boyen in to Captain Engle's office. The captain stood before a situation map on which eleven red thumb tacks had been inserted to show the geography of the night's robberies in the San Fernando Valley. Under each tack was a time notation.

"I can get a warrant on three counts," Engle said to Boyen. "Suspicion of grand theft, accessory to grand theft, suspicion of arson. Now get this. There will be no charge now if you give us a fair chance to talk to you. What have you got to tell us?"

"Nothing," said Boyen.

"Where were you between nine last night and this morning?"

"Part of the time I was waiting for the probation man to come home. He lives south of Wilshire Boulevard on Ardmore. But he didn't come home at all. I was going to ask him to move to release me from probation. I have plans to start up my own parking business downtown. I can't turn a wheel until the state takes me off the hook."

"Interesting if true," said Engle. "For your information, we captured two house robbers red-handed last night and both of them implicated you."

Boyen froze for some seconds. then said, "It could be former car hustlers. I've hired dozens. What did they do, use Mr. Glendon's station wagons? I wasn't there. I was in no position to stop them."

"You were in a perfect position for a lot of other things," Engle said. "You were out of touch with your boss. Why didn't you go to your own Christmas party?"

"You don't have booze on your breath when you talk to the Authority."

Rodriguez came into the conversation, saying, "You stayed away so long, Mr. Glendon had to take a

perishable shipment to the air freight himself."

"Air freight?" said Boyen. "No, indeed. I was supposed to take a case of perishables to the Honolulu freighter at Wilmington docks. But I phoned and found the ship wasn't loading until noon Christmas Day. I left the stuff in the cold room. Mr. Glendon wouldn't want that stuff laying around the docks going sour.

"I came back to the restaurant where you met me. I came back to get that shipment and take it down personally and see it into cold storage in the transfer sheds. I was too late. The restaurant was on fire."

"Since when has Mr. Glendon shipped merchandise to Hawaii?" said Joe. "The ortolans are a New York special, aren't they?"

"True," said Boyen, "from what I've heard. But this time the management was pioneering a consignment to the islands. Don't ask me why. I'm just a working stiff—or was."

"Did you turn over station wagons to Wyman and Macklin?" said Engle.

"I never heard of a Macklin. I remember Wyman, Jed Wyman, a husky bird who was a sub several weeks. But I never let anybody use the firm's wagons."

"Wyman had one, nevertheless. Wyman is dead. Died from wounds resisting arrest."

The information stopped Boyen cold. In a little while he said simply, "Jed Wyman was a parolee like myself. I took his word that he was playing it straight. Maybe that was my mistake."

The captain decided to hold Boyen for further questioning. Sergeant Fey took him to an isolation cell. Captain Engle's reason, Rodriguez soon learned, was to allow time to check on the accuracy of several Boyen statements.

Engle then asked the talker for a prowl car connection at the Pontchartrain fire, and instructed the prowlie to find Don Glendon and bring him to Headquarters at once.

V

GLENDON looked bedraggled and dispirited when he came into Captain Engle's office fifteen minutes later. His suit was smeared with wet charcoal. His sport shoes were scuffed with ashes and muck.

He said that firemen had found the charred body of a man in the ruins of the kitchen. The corpse was too disintegrated to be identified. It could have been a waiter. It could have been a transient breaking in to steal food.

Then, told about Boyen, Glendon quickly dropped his concerns of the fire.

"Ortolans for Hawaii," he said in a cry of disbelief. "I know absolutely nothing about that. The man's a liar. Can you bring him here?"

Sergeant Omar Fey shortly es-

corted Boyen back into the room.

"Who instructed you to take a case of ortolans to Wilmington docks?" Glendon said sharply to Boyen.

"I thought it was funny myself, Mr. Glendon," said Boyen. "The *maitre d* told me. He said the chef would have them ready and dry-ice packed after eight o'clock. I naturally assumed it was on your order. I checked the caterer's kitchen and there was the case in the cold room. Then I double-checked and found out that the ship would not start loading until today, so I left the case there."

"I ask you one question," said the baffled Glendon. "Did you loan out our wagons to anybody at any time?"

"Never! If any wagons are miss-

ing, they were stolen, or authorized out by somebody else."

Glendon faced the captain now and said, "I'd like to talk to you alone."

Sergeant Fey saw approval in Engle's eyes and marched out Boyen again.

"I made a bet on that fellow," said Glendon. "Now I guess it's up to me to take responsibility for his acts. Can you hold him awhile, captain? I've got some places to visit. It may have a bearing in proving whether Boyen is lying or not. I wonder if this gentleman can go along with me?" He indicated Joe Rodriguez.

"That's Joe's job," said Engle. "As long as you need him. Good luck."

It was now five twenty-seven and the horizon sky over the far San Rafael Hills of Glendale was faintly paling pink-red. The strings of Christmas lights on houses were out. Light traffic began to thicken the freeway.

With the young plain-clothesman now driving his own car, the two men headed for Holly Drive, a short street under the dam's face of the Hollywood Reservoir.

"This is what happens when a man takes things for granted," Glendon confided on the way. "I've been letting the place run itself more or less for the past year. As a matter of fact, I've spent most of my time in Beverly Hills politicking around with my friends, trying to promote a comeback for Jenna. Finance cut-ins, loans, polite blackmail, anything to get her a good part again. She's a problem child.

"So what happens? I wake up to find that wooden-head Armando Ycazo shipping stuff out for his own profit. I wonder how many jobs they've catered on the side and pocketed the money?"

"Let me give him the scare technique," said Joe. "I met him briefly. He didn't look like a professional liar to me. Amateurs spill if they're frightened properly."

Armando Ycazo and wife were evidently sleeping off the champagne bath of last night. Joe Rodriquez pounded and echoes rattled through the house. Each blow said emergency. At length the stolid dark Venezuelan came clumping to the door in a dressing gown. Seeing Don Glendon, the man bowed the unlikely visitors inside.

"Armando," said Glendon, "you told me once I was the fairest man you ever worked for. I took that to mean you would never double-cross me. Yesterday you told Buzz Boyen to take a case of ortolans to a Hawaiian boat. How long has this sort of thing been going on? I know nothing about Hawaii shipments. What is happening?"

"Artie tell me, I tell Pierre," Ycazo returned stiffly. "Pierre bakes. Give to Buzz, Pierre say."

"Was this the first shipment to Hawaii?"

"Yes, sir, first."

Rodriguez came in harshly, with, "Who instructed Clemenceau or Saxe to make a shipment to Hawaii? Whoever did has been robbing the Pontchartrain blind. Right now, Ycazo, you are an accessory to attempted grand theft. You are liable to five years imprisonment if found guilty. You'd better tell us what you know, man. *Hable Vd. la verdad.*"

The Spanish command to speak the truth did it. Ycazo looked at Joe Rodriguez with his poise down.

"Artie Saxe, he's say to Pierre, 'Cook 'em up.' "

Glendon went motionless. It must have been a shock, Rodriguez judged, to learn first-hand that a minor straw boss, a combination of smiling clown and jack-of-all-jobs should be arrogating power to himself.

"Armando," said Glendon, "tell me the truth. Are you getting a cut from Pierre and Saxe?"

"Nada," Yeazo shouted. *"Es verdad."*

As the restaurant owner and the detective walked away from the bemused Ycazo, Rodriguez said to Glendon, "You didn't tell him the restaurant burned down."

"Let him find out for himself," Glendon said grimly.

"I think he told you the truth," said Joe.

"That remains to be seen. How did I ever let myself get out of touch, Joe? That little punk Saxe. I never did trust him. I'd see him making time with the waitresses. Sucking for extra tips at the door —and that I hate. I should have fired him long ago. I should have fired 'em all."

"The chef sounds to me like a full-charge guy," said Rodriguez. "He went right ahead filling the order, making up shipping information."

"I always thought of Pierre Clemenceau as an agreeable phoney," said Glendon. Rodriguez noted that the man was glad to talk, glad to get things off his chest, as if he had been holding off a long time.

Glendon continued, saying, "He's a ham, of course, like all good chefs are. I never believed for a moment that Pierre Clemenceau was his real name. I found out that he came to this country as Louis Crell and a New York hotel decided he did not sound French enough."

No response came from their ring on the Saxe door at the Fernande Motel. Joe felt that it was not the time to break in at the rear quarters. The two men continued on to Pierre Clemenceau's home in the Lancastria Gardens above Hollywood Bowl.

There, they arrived just in time, for jumbo-sized Clemenceau was nervously seemingly ready to tie an untied four-in-hand and rush straight off.

"I heard the radio," he said breathlessly. "Are we burned out,

Mr. Glendon? I was just going out to see. Say it isn't so."

"We're burned out, all right," said Glendon. "Sit down, Pierre. I've got something more important to talk about."

"I do not understand," said the chef.

If he was a sure-enough Frenchman, he didn't make his case very well, Joe considered. No accent. No gestures. Only a nasal voice.

"Pierre," said Glendon, "who gave you permission to make up a case of ortolans for shipment to Hawaii? I want the truth. Who is acting like a manager at my restaurant? Is it Ycazo? Is it Saxe? Is it my wife? Is it you, yourself?"

"I thought the order came from you, Don. Artie Saxe himself told me, 'Pierre, you are famous. Hawaii wants your ortolans now.' I made them up."

"Did Saxe tell you where to ship them?"

"He did. He gave me the shipping papers made up. I do not write the English well."

Like hell he doesn't, Joe decided.

"Why didn't you check with me when an unusual order like that came to you? You know there was at least five hundred dollars of pheasants and materials tied up in that case."

"I do not know what to say," the chef replied somberly. His manner was one of regretful helplessness.

Glendon flipped up his hands in a gesture of giving up. He rose to go, and departing with Rodriguez, he said to Clemenceau, "We'll claim two thousand dollars for the case with the fire insurance people."

"They are burned?" said Clemenceau. He seemed horrified. "They couldn't be. Buzz Boyen went to take the case out last night before the party."

Glendon moved off with no reply. They headed for the Valley over the Cahuenga Pass on the Hollywood Freeway.

VI

IT WAS NOW after six on Christmas Day. Four compact lanes, crammed with automobiles bumper to bumper, marked the first freeway slow-down of the day at the dipping turn of the raceway at the barren hillside south of Universal City.

Rodriguez said, "You never actually saw the Hawaii shipping case, did you, Mr. Glendon? You just assumed that it existed and had been destroyed."

"No, I never saw it."

"You've tentatively taken the word of others that it existed. But Boyen could have been confused last night. Maybe he was sparring this morning to protect himself."

"It went like this, Joe," said Glendon. "I came to the office very late in the afternoon. A pile of letters had been waiting for me for some days. I spotted this emergen-

cy request from our New York agent. A New Year's order, it was. I called Armando on the house phone. Armando was busy seating some customers and Artie Saxe took the call. I told Saxe we had a commitment to fill on ortolans. He replied that the chef knew all about it and the stuff was being cooked and was almost ready to pack and ship. I didn't ask how he knew this because I figured my secretary had passed the word along earlier. I told him fine.

"I gave Artie the New York name and said to have Boyen take it over to the airport. Then later Boyen did not show up for the party and I assumed that he was delayed on the airport errand. But he wasn't. I found that out after everybody had gone home. I hoisted that damned case into the wagon myself. It seemed all in order, dry-ice, shipping instructions, and all."

"Then it is possible that somebody had a case ready for Hawaii, as Boyen maintained, and at the last minute ripped off the manifest and put on a new one to carry out your orders."

"By God, it is," said Glendon. "It is, but we'll never know. The fire took care of that."

Rodriguez had to say something now that the man might not like to hear.

"Last night," Joe said, "I came back to the restaurant with an officer for a routine check of the premises. You were in your office, Mr. Glendon, and you seemed to be reading the riot act to your wife. That big lighted window made it look like a stage scene to us. Well, a family quarrel is not a police problem, of course, so we went on our way after looking around. But the fact remains that you and your wife could have been seen at roughly two-thirty or before by others.

"They could have been the people who robbed your home, knowing you were occupied elsewhere. They could have double-backed later and set your place on fire to confuse the issue. Such a crackpot might well have been the one who was stealing your wagons, using them on heists, and returning them before the loss was noticed. That's why it's necessary to ask you now, Mr. Glendon, if there is any border-line acquaintance of yours or of Jenna Forza's whom you might secretly distrust to the point where you suspect him of being a nutball capable of serious wrong-doing?"

"You can speak frankly with me, Joe," Glendon said flatly. "I didn't come up from a movie grips without learning the world is full of fake friends. About the argument with my wife—I was giving her holy hell for shining up to Saxe at the party. She made a damn fool out of herself, dancing a sexy twist with him—imagine, in front of the help. That's the kind of stuff that makes gossip columns.

"Jenna, of course, can't under-

stand what I'm driving at. The old innocence crapola. But I have to say I think Saxe is still smart enough not to work with thieves, not to hand over company cars for a night. His type is yellow as ten-cent mustard when there's a personal risk involved."

Glendon was by now physically as well as mentally bushed. Rodriguez sped on out to Encino and delivered the exhausted man at his home. As he wheeled around and headed back for Van Nuys, Rodriguez noted Jenna Forza's Mercedes in the driveway.

It was now after seven and he was ready to admit privately that he was at the point of exhaustion himself.

Several leads were still open for checking. Rodriguez first tackled the Lockheed Airport freight line. He found from the firm's account records that the Pontchartrain Restaurant had shipped fourteen cases of ortolans to New York during the past year. Six of the cases had gone to Westar Food Distributors and eight to Opportunex Marketing Associates. The last case had been addressed to Westar.

Meanwhile, Engle received a preliminary report of the fire situation from the arson bureau of LAFD. No definite evidence of arson had yet been found in the almost total ruins. The body was of a 5'6" man and was being examined by the coroner. The man could have been a drunken employee,

unnoticed in a dark corner, and sleeping off the liquor.

A short time later, Don Glendon telephoned. He asked to talk to Rodriguez.

"My wife has just left me," Glendon said. "I thought you people ought to know."

The restaurant owner then related how he had figured that Jenna Forza was home, seeing her car in the drive. But she was not home, he learned later. She had left a note for him, saying she had enough and was going to Las Vegas to establish legal residence, leading up to a divorce. Glendon did not sound broken up emotionally. He gave the impression that the split-up had been expected for some time.

To the young detective, the news was intensely important, nonetheless. He made no comment to Glendon, other than the customary, "Sorry to hear it." But his judg-

ment formed at once: that the woman's move was not necessarily impulsive, not a whim, and not a culmination of previous differences. He felt this way because the time of the break was not at all favorable from the woman's standpoint. It was exactly the opposite.

Community property would be tied up for a long time while an insurance settlement on the fire was processed. The home robbery was also a serious insurance matter, requiring time to adjust, to permit reimbursement. Any woman who had been in and out of movie business affairs like Jenna Forza, would have better sense than to fly the coop at this time. Bad publicity alone would be working against her personal campaign to gain new recognition as an actress.

Yet, being a woman, she may have acted simply on intuition, Joe had to admit. Logic traditionally had no place in a career woman's life.

"It seems like she's running from something," Joe Rodriguez suggested. "She may figure that the fire and robbery and general troubles have made a different man of her husband. Now he's a tiger again, and going to put a microscope on her extra-curricular life. He certainly had her scared silly in his office last night."

"But balling her out for cutting up with Artie Saxe wouldn't necessarily be that important," said Engle. "Women don't ordinarily do their cutting up in public with the real Number One McCoy. They fasten on a harmless patsy and keep the real Number One out of the limelight."

Nonetheless, Rodriguez did not intend to forget Artie Saxe. He had met him and had noted the man's somewhat magnetic personality. Glendon himself had marked Saxe as a potential enemy.

After Rodriguez hung up, Captain Engle said, "A good night's sleep would help us both. But unfortunately, crime is best solved while it's squirming reality."

"That's why I'd like to keep plugging with you. I've got one more line to check out."

The unplumbed line, as Joe Rodriguez now explained to his superior, was the proposition that shipping way-bills had been switched.

"Check it out by all means," Engle said.

Harbor police were positioned better to do the leg work, so Rodriguez made his request to Wilmington sub-station. While waiting for a report, he decided to look into things at Encino. This was partially a courtesy call on Glendon, for he had warmed up to the man and did not like to think of him sitting alone in the midst of his many grievous problems.

"You needn't have come," said Glendon. "I'll live. As a matter of fact, I was running two businesses before—mine and hers. Now I'll have time for my own."

In a few minutes, at poolside in the thin bath of winter morning sunshine, Glendon belied his brave statement.

"A guy gets what he bargains for," he said sadly, "only I never thought it would happen to me. She was running with the Riviera crowd when I met her. She was one of those starlet movie jail baits, on her way up in foreign pictures. She trapped me for fair and why not? I was the personal friend of big shot American producers. Yes, I guess all she ever wanted me for was to help her crack Hollywood. I looked like I had the key to the golden door."

Glendon rambled on, and at last said something that began to intrigue Joe. "After we were married I caught her going out for a midnight swim with a pretty little male hotel clerk. I followed them to the beach and I wrapped a stick of driftwood around the guy's head. I gave him a cauliflower he'll see in the mirror the rest of his life. So what happens? Jenna makes me pay his family twenty thousand francs to hush it up. It would hurt her career, she claimed. And all the time I was right and she was wrong and so was the guy.". .

This articulate, likable fellow who had fought his way up in the always-rough battles of the restaurant racket, was no sissy, Joe was aware. Glendon had walked into a vexing situation, but he had worked at mastering it as many another bewildered, pride-conscious man had done before him.

VII

RODRIGUEZ returned to Van Nuys. Captain Engle awaited him eagerly.

"Joe, Harbor clicked for us," the captain said. "There is a case of ortolans at Wilmington after all. They were just about ready to sling it aboard. I have a man out there now. He's armed with a warrant. We're doing a peek job on that case. I know what you had in mind, Joe, though you didn't say so."

"Exactly, sir. A Hawaiian fence. Somebody in this valley is using Pontchartrain facilities and credit to ship valuables out of sight. Not only to Hawaii, but to New York."

"Purely diversionary," said Engle. "The stuff would come back from Hawaii in passenger trunks. No customs to go through. Or it would go farther across the Pacific to no-questions-asked markets in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia. Sold at two-bits on the dollar."

It was now nine on Christmas Day. Joe decided to take time off and scout up a restaurant, cafe, or even a hot dog stand, anything that might be open on the holiday. A detective's life was a hungry life.

Rodriguez thought of the fun and laughs connected with hot, heaping Christmas breakfast in East Los Angeles. There, his father used to churn up the fiesta drink of

breakfast, the Ramos Fizz—grapefruit juice beaten in a bit of egg yolk and drowned in tequila or gin. There had been Christmas mornings of splendor in more ways than one.

The news awaiting his return swept away all hunger pangs.

"Mink furs," Captain Engle said happily. "Twenty-six luxury jobs, finger-length and floor-length, Autumn Haze, Cerulean, White Jasmine, what have you. Plus miscellaneous low-brow stoles and jackets. Half a million dollars worth in that case. And Joe, this will kill you. Our man said, 'These are a different kind of mink called Ortolans Pontchartrain.' "

"They sure are," said Rodriguez. "Now we're connecting it all up, Captain. First, bush league robberies, by juveniles supposedly. Then organized robberies. What's our next move?"

"Find the guy who was smart enough to use the Pontchartrain as a front," said Engle. "We bring in everybody connected with Pontchartrain, along with our juveniles. We get them together and stir up the animals until some guy breaks."

Rodriguez considered the captain's idea and a warning signal flashed in his mind. Young Arnold Macklin was still in Hold. No inquiries had been made for him. His sponsor, Wyman, was dead and Macklin did not know it.

"More might be found out about Wyman and his real importance if Macklin were released and tailed. The kid will be eager at once to know how he stands. Wyman is the one man qualified to advise him."

"Well, we have time," Engle said. "We can put the arm on Saxe any time we want. Okay, let's see how Macklin acts."

Sergeant Omar Fey took the ball on this play. He went to Arnold Macklin's cell, telling him that since he was a youngster a civic organization for the prevention of juvenile crime had posted bail for him, and that he was free to go his way. He ordered Macklin to report his whereabouts by telephone tomorrow.

As soon as Macklin walked down Van Nuys Boulevard, Rodriguez and Fey got him in their sights. Macklin walked to a service station and went into its outside telephone booth. About fifteen minutes later, he was picked up by a 1937 nose-down hot-rod Ford, driven by an obvious teenager.

Rodriguez and Fey tailed the ancient Ford to Califa Street in North Hollywood, where the teenager got out of the car and Macklin drove away alone. The Ford went south on Lankershim and entered the Hollywood Freeway near Universal City, heading south at a modest speed.

"If he's lamming, we'll pick him up," said Joe. "I thought he would go to Jed Wyman's place and I

thought that would be in the Valley."

Macklin took the off ramp at Highland Avenue, then wove up into the slopes of the Santa Monica Mountains. Soon he was in the area above Hollywood Bowl. The Lancastria Gardens were located in this area, Joe considered. Macklin evidently also knew that they were. He slid in to a stop in the parking bay at the deluxe gardens.

"He must be seeing Pierre Clemenceau," Rodriguez said to Omar Fey. "Now we play it by ear."

Clemenceau's apartment was one of the higher-priced lanai type, with a view over the Bowl and to the east hill rises of Cahuenga Pass. Rodriguez led the way around to a point directly under the low-mounted lanai jut, which was screened by a thick growth of bougainvillea vines.

The men waited for some minutes and heard no voices from above. This was an indication that the lanai doors were closed and that the deck was empty.

"Give me a leg up," said Rodriguez. "I'll take a look."

Omar Fey bent his knee and held a basket hold for Joe's foot; then knotted his muscles in a quick boost. Rodriguez grasped the lanai rail and pulled himself up and over.

The view inside spelled only danger for young Arnold Macklin. Macklin's youth and athletic build was not doing him any good against the Army Forty-Five that Pierre Clemenceau held in his hand. The chef seemed to be ordering Macklin into a clothes closet.

Rodriguez took his service pistol from the belt holster under the right side of his coat. He crossed the eight feet of lanai deck as silent as a cat. Pierre Clemenceau's back was now in line of his sights through the glass.

Macklin, wide-eyed with fright, backed into the closet. Clemenceau slid the door panel into place. Then he roughly pushed a leather couch against the closet wall and set a catch at the panel's jointure.

Rodriguez quietly opened the door while this barricading was going on, and was in the room about ten feet away when Pierre Clemenceau faced around and saw him.

Rodriguez squeezed the trigger at the first flicker of movement in the man's gun hand. The heavy forty-five clattered down to the floor, hit, bounced, then roared out its triggered shot under the couch.

Clemenceau yelled in pain. Blood sprayed out from his wounded hand.

"Lie down on the floor," said Rodriguez. "You're under arrest."

As Clemenceau obeyed, silently, Joe yelled out the lanai door, "Come around front, Omar. I'm okay."

Waiting for his helper, Rodri-

guez took up the phone and called Hollywood Division. He figured that an ambulance could get to Lancastria Gardens quicker from his own precinct.

"Send a medic to dress a wound on the spot," he requested.

Sergeant Fey was now pushing the front door buzzer. Rodriguez went up front to let him in. As he did so, he passed by an adjoining room and the door opened.

Jenna Forza looked at him with calculating, motionless green eyes.

"Go in there and take care of your friend," said Rodriguez to the woman.

He opened the door to Sergeant Fey.

In the next seven minutes, as the emergency ambulance sirened up and around narrow curves to the Lancastria, and Fey guarded the whimpering Clemenceau and the indignant Jenna, Rodriguez rapidly searched through the apartment.

No other person was hidden. But plenty of interesting things were.

A closet in the bedroom disgorged a heavy trunk and a suitcase. Women's luggage was piled in a corner of the room Jenna had come from. A gold lame bag, Jenna's, had among its numerous objects two round trip air tickets to Las Vegas on the 3:15 p.m. flight out of Lockheed. At the kitchen service entrance, a sizable packing case stood vertically outside the door, evidently awaiting the arrival of an express man.

The siren's whine now signaled arrival of expert assistance. Joe Rodriguez returned to the living room and watched the doctor working over Clemenceau on the floor.

"We want to keep him a few minutes for questioning," said Joe to the medic.

"He's not seriously injured," the doctor said. "Just a hole between thumb and forefinger."

The doctor finished his cauterizing and dressing and helped pull the limp, fightless Clemenceau on to a chair. While this was going on, Joe Rodriguez shoved back the couch and released Arnold Macklin from his imprisonment.

The young man said nothing as he sat down, as directed, next to Jenna Forza. He eyed her boldly, like any other preview fan.

"What were you doing here, Mrs. Glendon?" said Rodriguez.

"Who wants to know?" the woman said. She was indeed the stereotype of an ill-bred movie queen.

"I could arrest you right now," he said. "But you happen to be Don Glendon's wife. He's had enough trouble for one man. So I'll give you a choice. Speak civilly now or be taken in to Van Nuys and booked on a count of conspiracy to defraud. Do you care to explain yourself, Mrs. Glendon?"

The bite and command in the

detective's words had their effect. She said, "I'm on my way to Las Vegas. Pierre was my escort. That's all there is to it."

"An armed escort, I see," Rodriguez said. "An escort who was ready to shoot down an unexpected caller while you hid in his bedroom."

"What else could I do but hide? Do you think a lady wants publicity all the time?"

"You certainly could do without it now," said Rodriguez.

To Sergeant Fey, he said, "Omar, do you think you could pry open that shipping case outside the kitchen?"

"Stop!" Clemenceau yelled. "You have no right to break into my private property!"

"That's what you think," Rodriguez said. Then he pulled a legal-looking document from his pocket, whapped it on a table. He said, "We're the police, remember? We have all the writs and warrants we need by law." Then he pocketed the 'document', which was just as well. It was no more than a department list of the eleven Valley robberies of the past night.

VIII

MEANWHILE, Omar Fey went to the kitchen. Noises of his activity carried back to the living room. These sounds of hammering and squeaking boards soon appeared genuinely unnerving to Jenna Forza. She listened and stood up. Her emerald green eyes flashed with opal highlights of hate.

Rodriguez judged that, woman-like, she might try to break away and run, perhaps to try to hurl herself over the lanai rail beyond the door. He snapped off the pair of handcuffs from his belt.

"Ever see anything like this before?" he said to her and jingled the cuffs. "Sit down or you'll wear bracelets. And you'll ride to Van Nuys in a cage."

She sat down, sullenly, but not for long. Seconds later she was shouting, "Take him to prison! There's the man who did it!" She pointed at Clemenceau. "I've done nothing wrong."

Pierre Clemenceau smiled half-nervously at Joe. Then he laughed out loud at her performance. Rodriguez noticed that the young fellow Macklin, only a marveling spectator up to now, smiled, too. Jenna Forza had overplayed her lines.

"What do you know about this, buddy?" said Rodriguez to Macklin. "You look a lot cockier than last night when we caught you in the act."

Jenna surprisingly spoke up for him, saying, "This baby, he's a nothing. They only use him to drive cars."

Rodriguez's heart pumped faster at this slight slip of the tongue by Jenna and he rammed in with, "They used him last night to rob a house. He's come up in the world, Mrs. Glendon. He's on his way to becoming another Jed Wyman. Except he's not going to make it. He'll get the works. Maybe twenty years."

Accessory to burglary did not ordinarily draw twenty years, but Rodriguez said it for a good reason.

Macklin looked as though he were going to cry. "I'm no crook, Mr. Rodriguez," he said. "I came to see Pierre to find out where I could reach Wyman. Wyman never ever told me his hangout. I'm getting out of their lousy set-up."

Rodriguez figured that the time had come at last to use the shock treatment.

"We found your Hawaii shipment at Wilmington," he said casually. Then he added a tactical lie. "We're having the robbed people come in tomorrow and identify their expensive mink coats and jewelry. Quite a large haul you had there—half a million dollars worth. We've got Jed Wyman in jail. He's given us enough information to send you up for a sure ninety-nine years—"

"It's true, Pierre. I told you they arrested Wyman," Macklin broke in nervously. "He wouldn't believe me, Mr. Rodriguez. He was locking me in the closet so Jenna Forza wouldn't hear. They were almost ready to leave when I showed up."

As Clemenceau scowled, Omar Fey appeared at the kitchen door. The sergeant grinned and held up his fingers in the O sign of success. Joe Rodriguez took the document from his pocket, and traced down to the specific information on the Glendon home robbery.

"One floor-length opera mink by Collinaga?" he asked.

"Right," said Fey.

"Two Autumn Haze jobs by Winkley of Beverly Hills?"

"They're there."

"Five evening gowns by Ransostelle's of San Francisco?"

"Check."

"One man's full-leather hunting coat, fleece-lined. Aberson Outfitting?"

"Right."

"A gold cigar case. Initials D.G."

"Right. In the pocket of the hunting coat."

"Swiss wrist watch, gold, engraved fraternal award to Don Glendon?"

"Check."

"That was just part of the Glendon haul," said Joe.

"There's dozens more items," said Fey.

"She arranged that one," Pierre Clemenceau said calmly. "I would no more let thieves rob Don Glendon than I would my father. I admired the man."

Jenna greeted the words with a half-laugh, half-cry of no words. She levelled the emerald green eyes at Clemenceau. "You started robbing him blind a week after you came to work, paisan. You thought I would be on your side because you knew me in Rome when your name was Louis Crellin. Well, I wasn't going along, Pierre. Other times, other places, they do not concern me."

"Why did you come here, then?" said Rodriguez. "You are something of a public name. He is an unknown chef. Why would you humiliate yourself by choosing him as, you say, your escort to Vegas?"

Jenna remained silent, obviously smoldering with confused thoughts.

Joe said to Clemenceau, "This shipping case was to follow the Hawaii shipment, of course. This case is filled now because you had them drive the getaway car here. You did that so that Jenna Forza would have no clothes problem in Vegas.

"The stuff from the other three robberies would catch up with you later, you hoped, by means of another fake shipment similar to the ortolans. After you got to Las Vegas and settled down for Mrs. Glendon's divorce, then both of you were going to duck out for a few days and fly to Honolulu, pick up the Wilmington case, stash it away with a confederate, and return to Vegas without anybody being aware of your absence.

"Six weeks from now you were going back to Honolulu, legal man and wife. On that trip Jenna Forza would be telling the newsmen how her new husband was soon to open a deluxe restaurant in Hawaii. Money would be no problem, no matter if Jenna Forza was cut off by the court in a settlement with Don Glendon."

"You told him, Pierre," Jenna burst out. "You son of a pig!"

"I told nobody nothing," said Clemenceau. He now appeared curiously unmoved by the woman or the mounting mass of incriminating accusations. In this reaction, he had the stamp of the conscienceless professional.

"But you were going to Hawaii," said Rodriguez. "Otherwise you would never have sent a half million dollar case there.

Clemenceau had evidently talked as much as he cared to. He said to Rodriguez, "My hand. It is alive with pain. Can I go?"

Joe Rodriguez took him out to the ambulance, where the doctor waited, and instructed the team to drop off the chef at the prison ward of County General Hospital.

When Rodriguez came back, Macklin was being questioned by Sergeant Fey.

"You fellows," said Macklin, "caught me on my graduation night. Wyman wouldn't take a chance on anybody unless he personally checked him out. It was kind of funny, now that you think of it, catching teacher along with the students."

"Why did you mention Buzz Boyen when we questioned you?" said Rodriguez.

"Did I?" said Macklin. "Why not? Boyen to us meant cars. And help if we needed it. Jed told us Boyen had no choice. He had to accommodate us. A parolee hasn't much to say about what people tell him to do. He's got to do it and forget it. When we got his wagons we felt better. We weren't on any police car's pick-up list. We were Pontchartrain caterers on a job."

"Thanks," said Rodriguez. "Telling the truth's in your favor."

The young detective now unexpectedly whirled around to confront Jenna Forza. "The same goes for you," he said.

"Do not threaten me, policeman," she said frostily. "I am still Jenna Forza and still Mrs. Don Glendon."

Joe Rodriguez grinned and decided then and there to give her the harpoon back.

"We are picking up Artie Saxe," he said. "Your dancing partner will have his chance to tell us how much you are involved in the robberies and fire."

The word fire ignited her all over again.

"Artie Saxe, little *pongo,*" she said crisply. "Go get him. Go make him talk. He must have set the fire. I'll tell you why. Don bawled him out terrible after the party. Don is a crazy man. Don made him crawl—in front of me, in front of Ycazo. Don said he was a waiter again. No more assistant to Armando. The little *pongo,* he turned white. I know what's next. He got revenge."

Jenna now reverted to her distant manner. What an act, Rodriguez. Her motivation could be simply another attempt to slide out without being held.

But Jenna Forza's real connection with the chain-reaction crimes so far escaped him. There was no nailed-down proof of criminal allegiances. Smart lawyers could make the point that loose associations were not necessarily criminal. Joe pondered how he could definitely associate her with legal wrong-doing.

IX

THE YOUNG DETECTIVE had no ready answer. So he solved the dilemma by formally arresting Jenna, over her shrieking protest. He also formally revoked Arnold Macklin's bailed freedom. He took them both to Van Nuys Police

Headquarters, shackled together in Fey's car.

Taking Jenna, who was well-equipped to fight back, was the kind of decision a young detective learns to make in Hollywood, where importance is often self bestowed. He knew that Jenna would

be handled with kid gloves, probably held for the moment in a matron's office before transfer to the women's section of the new Valley regional jail.

It was now approaching noon. Rodriguez was no longer hungry and tired from the steady maze of action, speculation, and mental misgivings. That certain lifty feeling of being on the verge of corralling guilty parties, was with him in the nature of a second wind.

He left the handling of Jenna Forza to Sergeant Fey and took young Macklin back to his cell.

"Can I go in with Boyen?" the young man asked.

"Not a chance," said Rodriguez.

But Macklin's request intrigued Rodriguez. He now asked Captain Engle to let him talk to Boyen alone.

"I'll be glad to talk," the probationer said in the Interview Room, "if you'll bring Mr. Glendon and his wife here. I don't want to do either of them an injustice."

Rodriguez cleared the arrangement with the captain. A squad car was sent to Encino to bring in Don Glendon.

Meanwhile a Hollywood Division plain-clothesman checked out Artie Saxe. The Hollywood man reported that Saxe and a blonde-haired girl, ten or eleven years of age, came to the apartment door. Mr. Saxe explained that he was waiting for his divorced wife and her new husband to pick up the child, his daughter, for whom he had been awarded provisional visitation rights on certain holidays of the year.

The Hollywood man waited; learned that such was a true fact. Now he was bringing Artie Saxe to De Longpre Avenue to make a deposition on his movements since eleven-thirty last night.

Saxe, unless he had most elaborately hoodwinked the police, had removed himself from suspicion of evading the authorities on Christmas Day, Rodriguez judged.

Don Glendon came into the interview room first. He sat down and did not look at Boyen or say a word. An aroma of raw whisky came along with Glendon. Then Jenna Forza arrived from her confinement. She also said nothing, but she appeared vastly irritated

and ready to blaze out at anybody who might displease her.

"Bert A. Boyen, known as Buzz," said Rodriguez. He read a big file card, like he was accustomed to seeing the rank do it, close to the eyes. He was secretly elated that the busy captain had given him carte blanche to conduct the questioning. Rodriguez was a kind of "judge" for the moment, with Sergeant Fey and two department officers as his witnessing assistants.

Rodriguez continued, saying to Boyen, "Why did you set fire to the Pontchartrain Restaurant?"

The question was not a shot in the dark. It represented Joe's careful deduction: Saxe seemed to be eliminated as a fire suspect; Ycazo was in the good graces of Glendon and had no reason to cancel out his job; Clemenceau's time seemed to have been taken up in some connection or other with the Glendon robbery at that hour of the morning; and Wyman was dead before the fire had broken out.

Boyen spoke up surprisingly fast. "Because that was the only way to help Mr. Glendon," he said.

Rodriguez felt suddenly warm inside at this admittance of guilt. "To help Mr. Glendon? What do you mean by that?"

"Mr. Glendon was taken over by a bunch of rats and didn't know it. He refused to believe his own eyes," said Boyen. "I tried to get across to him that funny things were going on. Jed Wyman was in and out, visiting with the chef whenever he pleased. Ycazo and Saxe were acting like they owned the place. Prove it, Mr. Glendon said to me. Mr. Glendon is here, so he can verify what I say. I checked around, trying to find out what was going on, to prove it.

"I found Wyman had connections with several other big restaurants in the Valley. Wyman was getting information on the names, on who was dining out and going to the larger parties. Then Wyman was directing quick heists by his teams on the vacant homes. Check the records. You'll find a lot of big robberies on Thursday, cook's night out. You'll find a lot on the big association and club nights.

"Pierre Clemenceau assisted Wyman. You would have thought it would be Saxe or Ycazo, because they worked up front in the restaurant and checked off the reservations list, knew who was there, talked with customers like old friends. But Ycazo is a foreigner, much wiser than you think, and he refused to be sucked in.

"Saxe was weaker than he looked. He wanted to be a big shot, but never had the guts to be. He was afraid of Jed Wyman, and Wyman was a tough hombre, so tough that he attracted young punks like flies to sugar. They wanted to be like him. They wanted to have pockets full of money.

They wanted to be a Robin Hood type like Wyman somehow acted."

Don Glendon interrupted, saying, "You said you set the fire, Buzz. Why did you think burning up my place could help me?"

"The box of loot for Hawaii," said Boyen. "That was the last straw, in my book. I had heard Pierre gripe occasionally about clearing out, about going to Hawaii and starting a restaurant of his own. I knew he had certain feelings about Mrs. Glendon—"

"You crummy bum," said Jenna. "How dare you say that?"

Buzz Boyen sighed and looked at the ceiling.

"If you suspected that there was marital trouble at the Glendons, what right did you have to interfere?" said Rodriguez.

"I didn't have any right, I guess," said Boyen. He looked down forlornly at the table top. "But it made me feel good to do a good turn for Mr. Glendon. I would be on Skid Row right now if Mr. Glendon hadn't taken a chance on me. He gave me a steady job. I owe him a lot. I couldn't see a good man like him treated shabby by his wife."

"But you burned up the place, man," said Rodriguez. "And a body was found in the ruins. How did that help Mr. Glendon?"

"Sooner or later the thieves would have put suspicion on Mr. Glendon. It was easy for the thieves to disappear in a hurry. Mr. Glendon would have been accused, branded a crook, blamed forever. It would hurt him the rest of his life."

"Yet you got in the act yourself," said Rodriguez. "You took the Hawaii shipment down to the docks. You did not say a word about that to Mr. Glendon."

Boyen looked up, straight into the impassive face of Don Glendon, and said, "I'm sorry I have to say this, Mr. Glendon, but it happens to be the truth. Two people told me to take that case to Wilmington. One was Pierre Clemenceau. At first I refused. Then I thought it over. I had wanted to get out and be my own boss. Pierre could throw a monkey wrench into my plans. Then I thought of all you had done for me, Mr. Glendon. This time I really refused. I told him off. So I thought everything was settled now.

"But it wasn't. Pierre got in touch with your wife. She phoned me. She ordered me in your name to take the case to the ship and shut my trap. I carried out her order. I stopped off on the way back and I got a little drunk, trying to forget how I had double-crossed you. I certainly did not intend to show up at the Christmas party and try and act happy.

"I went up on Mulholland Drive in your wagon and sat there for a long time, just thinking up what to say when questions were asked. I drove back once and you were in

your office talking to your wife. You looked real mad. I walked around the place. I saw another case in a wagon. I knew that something had happened, but I wasn't sure what. I didn't know what to think except that I had somehow failed you.

"I left and came back later. The place was dark. The wagon was gone. I imagined you had been double-crossed again. I threw a G.I. can of gas into the kitchen and lit a match. I figured this was wiping the slate clean for you. You could settle all your problems when you rebuilt the restaurant. The rats would run from the sinking ship."

Don Glendon now closely observed his wife's face. She noticed the keen observation. Suddenly she arose and started for the door of the interview room.

Joe Rodriguez put up a hand to bar her way.

"No," said Glendon. "Don't stop her, Joe. She's on her way to somebody else. Somebody else somewhere. That's been her life. That's all she knows. I have no personal charge to make against her. I have no proof if I did make charges. Only somebody else's word."

Omar Fey took Buzz Boyen to his cell.

Don Glendon walked out slowly, thoughtfully. The two officer assistants walked out, smiling.

Jose Juan Rodriguez finished his notes for later dictation to the bureau stenographer, and went to Captain Clarence Engle's office. Engle lit a cigar and grinned.

"It started with a four hundred dollar house robbery," Engle said," and it ended with a million dollar fire and a half million dollar heist recovery. I'll never forget this Christmas Day, Joe, because it told us one thing we were never entirely sure about, although I admit we should have known better. There's no ring of juvenile thieves in the Valley.

"There was a rising ring of pros, yes, and after a fashion they were developing a farm system for talent, but that's as far as it got. Thanks for helping us kill it off, Joe. A thing like that could have grown like a cancer and pushed us back into the days of the Chicago crime syndicates."

"I was just thinking, Captain," said Joe Rodriguez, "the cons at San Quentin are going to eat high on the hog next Christmas. With Chef Le Grand Pierre Clemenceau king of the kitchen."

"They'll have Ortolans Pontchartrain—made out of sea gulls —along with the salt pork and beans."

The Crime Scholarship

by STEVE APRIL

They had fifteen minutes, a sleeping guard—a fortune. They couldn't lose. Or—could they?

OUTSIDE this little spot in the road they insisted is a village, they have a traffic light with a large red sign in the background. When the light's red you can't see it and of course there's a hick cop in a

squad car waiting for suckers. You get the picture: the speed trap supported the village.

It's called Timber. It's about 150 miles north of Santa Fe.

When the cop sirened me down I was in a bad mood, due to a deal I was in on having soured, so one thing became another. Before I knew it the hick cop threw a gun on me and I was up for disorderly conduct. The village was so tiny they didn't have a regular jail but used the county jail, which was a small building located at one end of the two block main street.

The crime rate in the county must have been the lowest in the U.S.—while I was waiting to be arraigned I didn't see more than a dozen inmates and only three guards. Actually it was a pleasant can as jails go, and I've been in quite a few. The food was not bad and the cells clean. So when the tough judge gave me a lecture about "outsiders breaking our laws," and a $100 fine or sixty days in the can, I took the time. This deal that had soured with some loan sharks, I figured a two-month rest would be a comfortable way of shaking the muscle goons off my back.

I was astonished when I found myself sharing a cell with Felton Williams. While I'd never met him before, I'd heard of Felton, an old-timer who had pulled some big jobs. He'd already done five months of a six-month stretch for a house to house swindle he'd been working—selling $400 color TV sets "to select customers for the special pre-advertising price of $150—$50 down and the balance on delivery." Felton would go through a small town, picking up a dozen fifty buck deposits in a few hours and then skip.

He was a thin guy with brushed silver hair and shrewd eyes. After we had exchanged a few names of buddies we both knew and I was convinced he was *the* Felton Williams, I was doubly glad I'd taken the time. Two months in a cell with a sharp operator like Felton was the same as taking a college course in crime.

He was glad to see me, too, said, "I've been looking for a guy like you, Davie."

"Some punk giving you a hard time here?" I asked, flexing my muscles. Learning from a guy like Felton would take me out of the goon class.

"Oh no. I need your help in a project I have going. A nice score."

"Yeah?" I said cautiously. "What is it?"

"I'll tell you—in time."

The following morning a young guard named Lenny took us out on a two-man work detail. This can really was a joke. Lenny took Felton and me outside to work on a wall being built next to a tall corn field. We leisurely piled up big flat rocks while Lenny sat on a stone and soon dozed off!

Felton whispered, "Lenny is the ambitious type, goes to some hick college about fifty miles away at night, sleeps all day. I think he plans to become a doctor. Sometimes his wife—a cute broad—drives over with his lunch."

"How come you've spent five months here? Even a kid could break out of this paper-box dump."

"Oh, I'm going to take off soon."

Building this rough wall wasn't hard and we were inside by three o'clock with nothing to do for the balance of the day but listen to radio music piped into our cells, or after supper hear Felton talk about some of his better jobs. Frankly this crackerbox jail was the nearest thing to a hotel I've ever seen.

On the second night we were in the cell, after Felton filled me in on the various ways to open a locked door—without a key—he suddenly told me, "Dave, you and I are going to bust out of here."

"Sorry, Felton. Not me. I don't mind passing a brace of months here—I had loan shark trouble on the outside. And you only have another month to go, so why—?"

"Davie, we're only going to escape for fifteen minutes, then come back."

"Break out and then return? Felton, are you putting me on?"

We had a locker in the cell and the old boy pulled out the bottom of it to show me a roll of hospital tape, long, hooded masks made by cutting eye holes in some burlap sacks and two realistic looking guns he had carved out of soap and blackened with shoe polish.

Replacing the locker bottom, he said, "I told you the first night you came that I was looking for an experienced joker for a project. Listen carefully. While I was working this village I noticed their bank is a pushover. Two women tellers, an old duck they call a guard and the manager. It should be a fat bank; this is a rich farming country. The

idea of knocking over the bank came to me when I saw Lenny, the sleeping beauty guard."

"Take it from the top again, Mr. Felton. Are you saying we're going to rob this bank while we're *in* the can?"

"That's a good way to put it. These crummy gray pants might be recognized, that's why we'll wear the sacks over our heads, roll up our pants to our knees. Be simple to hide the sacks, guns and tape inside our shirts when we go out to work. Soon as Lenny dozes off, we cut through that corn field. We'll come out about one hundred yards behind the bank. We rush in and slug the old cop, gag and tie up the tellers and any customers.

"We won't be greedy, just take about ten grand, which makes for

only a small bundle. Then we dash back into the corn field, bury the masks and fake guns, return to working on the wall as if nothing happened. I've already made a couple of trial runs across the field. The whole caper shouldn't take over fifteen minutes.

"Okay, there's a big stink in the village but we're in the clear. We're in jail. Lenny will never admit he was catching up on his sleep. We hide the ten grand in the bottom of the locker and when our time is up, we each walk out with five grand, clean as a whistle!"

"Don't they ever inspect the lockers?"

"Sure, once every week. Davie, this is a sleepy village with a sleepy jail and a sleepy bank. There's never been a hold-up here nor an escape. Most of the punks here are in for being drunk, beating their wives, stuff like that. Our locker has passed inspection all this time. Nobody has ever thought to pull up the bottom board, never found my sacks and guns. That's why we can't take too much green stuff, only enough to hide safely. Ten grand in ten dollars and twenty dollars makes about nine slim bundles. Look Davie, you think about it."

I thought for two days. The next morning I watched Lenny settle on a rock, rifle between his knees, start to doze off. He was usually red-eyed from studying all night, slept for an hour or more at a time. In fact, as he was dozing off he noticed me watching him.

"Wake me if anybody comes along, Dave," he said.

"Okay. But who's guarding who?"

"Hell, there's no place to run to here, no bus or train station for miles. One of the farmers would spot you before you got a mile away. And you're doing short time. Trying to escape would be silly."

I had confidence in Felton. He was an old hand. With a five grand stake and me forgotten by the strongarm boys, I could go East and take my time looking around for something. That night I told Felton I was in.

On Friday we had the sacks, tape and guns in our shirts when we went out on the wall detail. As usual, after about an hour of sitting in the warm sun, Lenny went to sleep. Felton and I took off through the corn stalks, running bent over, the corn so high we couldn't be seen. Coming out of the field in back of the bank, we rolled up our pants, put the sacks over our heads. Holding the soap-guns, we ran for the bank.

The robbery came off fast—the old guard so terrified I didn't have to slug him. Backing the girl tellers, the guard, the manager and one customer against a wall, we quickly bound and gagged them.

Then Felton scooped up packages of bills and we rushed out of the bank, into the corn field.

We even got a break—a few cars were going along Main Street a second after we left the bank and one of them backfired a couple of times.

Ripping off the sacks as we ran back, rolling our pants down, Felton showed me a kind of mud hole where we threw in our "guns," which would soon be soap bubbles. We buried parts of the sacks here and there and reached the wall where Lenny was still pounding his ear exactly fourteen minutes after we'd started.

We counted the loot—we had $12,000! Putting six grand inside our shirts, we started working.

It was at least twenty minutes later before the sound of a police siren brought Lenny awake. He glanced at us, piling stones at our usual slow pace. Maybe ten minutes later the other day guard came out and told Lenny, "The bank was held-up by two masked men! They made their getaway in a fast car!"

We were taken back to our cells. The guards were going to join a posse hunting for the bank robbers. Felton and I put the money under the bottom of the locker, sat around, listening to a ball game on the radio. I sure had to admit Felton really had something working between his ears.

We were never suspected. We had a perfect alibi. Each morning and night I lifted the board, to make sure the dough was there and time passed very pleasantly.

Some weeks later, on the day Felton was due to be released, I decided I'd take my six grand out on the job, in case Felton tried leaving with it all. The fact is that although I trusted Felton, that last night I awoke long before the guard came around to get us out of the sack to make sure the old boy wasn't tempted. At about 5:45 A.M. I saw him quietly get up and dig into his mattress, take out a package of bills!

Jumping out of my cot, I clipped him on the jaw, knocking the chiseler cold. In the faint light from the hall bulb I opened the bottom of the locker, counted the piles of money—the $12,000 was still there. I took his money package over to the bars, it was in $50 bills, $5000 worth!

Felton was now sitting up on the cell floor, rubbing his chin. I whispered, "You chiseling fink, you held out on me!"

He gave me a glassy-eyed shrug as I put the five grand in with the other loot, replaced the locker bottom.

Old Felton was tougher than I thought; he suddenly kicked out, catching me above the ankles. We started wrestling on the floor, knocked over the one metal table in the cell, making a hell of a racket. The night screw came on the run, put cuffs on us. In the morning we were put in solitary, a month added to our sentences.

Solitary in this county jail was a

laugh—it wasn't any dark coffin; they merely put us each in a different cell, no exercise, smokes or radio, but we had the same decent food as before. But I wasn't laughing, at first: I kept thinking of some new cons getting our cell, finding the loot. But after a week I relaxed, knew things were okay. The village drunk, who was the jail's one trusty, never said anything about it when he brought my meals, although he was full of the usual jailhouse gossip.

Felton's cell was on another floor, but the morning we were released from solitary, he managed to get me aside and whispered, "Dave, I'm sorry I tried to cross you, but let's forget it. It would be stupid to lose seventeen thousand dollars over nothing. Okay, Davie?"

"Okay."

Felton was due to be sprung at noon and they took us back to our old cell. The second we were locked in, alone, we made for the locker—our smokes and other stuff was there but the damned money was gone!

Felton started cursing. After a moment I told him, "Aw, shut up. Do you think the jail officials took it?"

"Hell no! If they had found it we would have been charged with the bank job weeks ago. Naw, we've been taken by some lousy punk. In the few hours I have here before being released, we'll have to shake down every punk in this lousy can!"

"I'm for that. But suppose some guy found it and was already sprung? Most clowns are only in here for a few weeks."

"We'll show these rats what a couple of pros can—" Felton never finished what he was saying. A new guard opened our cell door and told me, "Come on, you're on my work detail. Felton, since you're getting out at noon, you remain here."

I asked, "Where's Lenny?"

"You mean the old guard? The way I hear it, he and his wife are in Europe, studying at some swank English college. A relative died and the lucky stiff came into a wad. Let's go, Dave."

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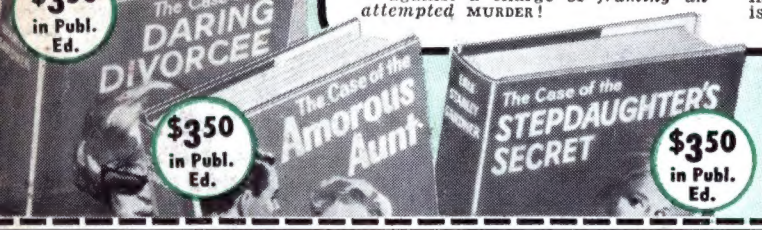

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